

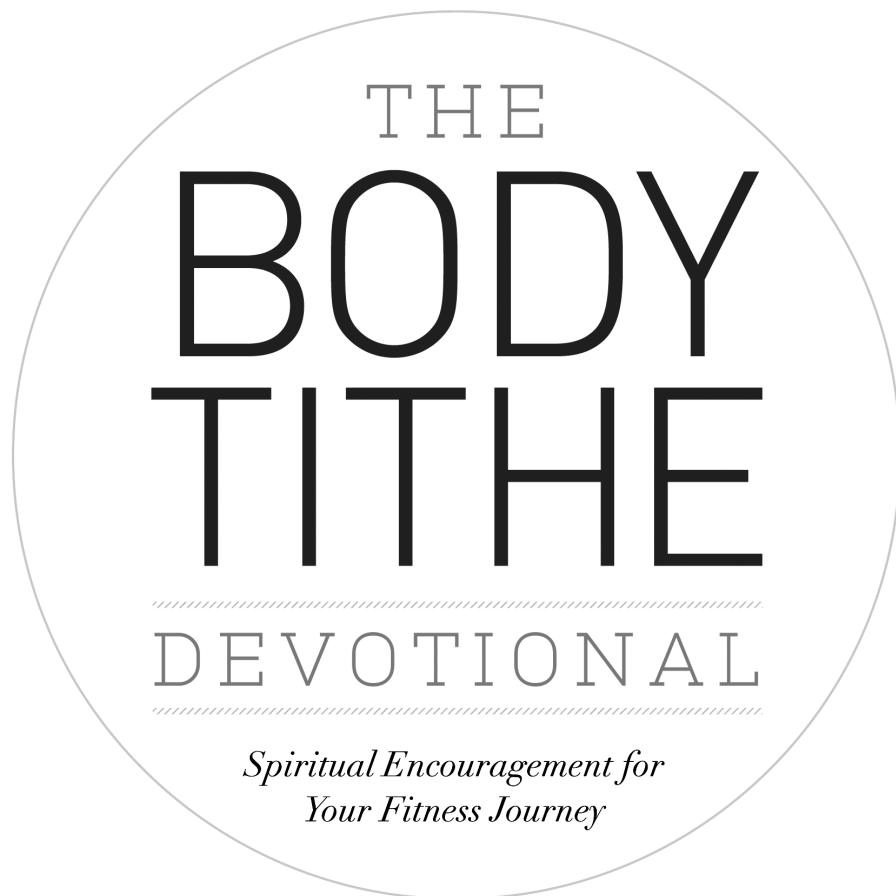
THE
BODY
TITHE

DEVOOTIONAL

*Spiritual Encouragement for
Your Fitness Journey*



MATTHEW PRYOR



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*Spiritual Encouragement for
Your Fitness Journey*

by

MATTHEW PRYOR

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INTRODUCTION

I'm the youngest of three sons, separated by roughly four and eight years from my brothers. I was active and healthy when I was young, but I was chubby. You probably wouldn't have thought twice about it, as I didn't stand out in a crowd. I stood out in my own eyes, though. No matter how charming I was (and trust me, I was plenty charming), at some point the chubby got the focus.

I'm 41 now, but I still remember an episode in third grade or so. I was sitting on the stairs in the basement of one of my best friends. We must have been roughhousing and sweaty because I didn't have my shirt on. When he saw my fat rolls, he pointed at them and commented. I don't even think he was being malicious ... it just came out. Nevertheless, thirty-some-odd years later, I can still feel that remark.

One summer break in middle school, some friends (who were girls) sent me a postcard from Florida. On the front of it was some ripped dude in Speedos. On the back they wrote, "You wish." They were trying to be funny, but they weren't very good at it (and my mom certainly didn't like it either).

Another time in middle school, I remember playing dodgeball during recess. Must have been one of my less charming days because I got into a little bit of a shouting match. A kid on the other team yelled, "Well, at least I'm not chubby." I even remember where I was in the gymnasium when he said it. That was thirty years ago.

I remember in high school not wanting to take my shirt off at swim parties or for shirts/skins basketball games. On the basketball team, I was a decent shooter. I didn't get much playing time, though, in part because I was so slow. I was one of the last to finish any kind of speed drill. I dreaded practice because of the running and the humiliation. That was twenty-five years ago.

It wasn't until my early twenties that I got in really good shape for the first time. It felt awesome. There was no going completely back to the old me. That said, there certainly would be "lulls." During one such lull on family vacation, someone said to me, "Remember when you used to be in really good shape?" I know my family loves me and wants the best for me, and it

probably just slipped out. But it hurt. That was probably 13 years ago. I don't think I've had much of a lull since then.

If it doesn't kill you, it just makes you stronger, right? Well, in this case, yes. It was a legitimate source of motivation for me. At the time, I certainly wouldn't have been thankful for the statements people made. They created insecurities and wounded feelings. Now that I've healed, though, I'm grateful, as they serve to propel me. There are scars but no pain. Only reminders of where I was and where I wanted to be.

God also was doing a work in me. I believe He allowed me to go through those trials for a reason. That reason became clearer as I matured more and more in my faith.

Romans is an incredible book in the Bible, layered with insights and revelations that build and encourage one's faith. Chapter eight in particular always leaves me feeling upbeat, especially when you read verses like this:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”
— verse 28 (NIV)

For me, the work He was doing opened my eyes to the importance of fitness. He invigorated me to dig deeper into the relationship my fitness had to my faith. In turn, my motivation for my fitness changed.

Yes, I still look to achieve certain physical results. However, my overall goal is singular in purpose: to honor God with my body.

The mind, body, and spirit relationship can be a difficult one to understand. Certainly they're entwined, but to what extent? It's hard to know for certain. We know from Genesis that the body came first, and then life was breathed into it. In fact, the KJV reads not just “life” but “soul.” Genesis 2:7 reads, “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” The breath of God is what makes us us. Our bodies seem to merely hold the true us.

C.S. Lewis would likely agree. He is often accredited with saying, “You don't have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.” I tend to side with this viewpoint. We are not given new souls when we enter into heaven; we are given new bodies (Philippians 3:21). If we are a body, how would we be given new bodies in heaven?

Nevertheless, as we learn more about the human body, we learn just how closely it is related to our emotions. For instance, our thought life can have a profound effect on the physiology of our brain. There are neural pathways in your brain that can be physically altered based on the things you're processing. Thinking about food can make you salivate and release digestive enzymes, hormones, and acids in your stomach. Both are physical responses to emotional stimuli.

Of course, what affects our soul can easily affect our body and vice versa. Ever been deeply grieving and felt either famished or overly satiated? Or perhaps experiencing seasons of especially intense joy has led you to feel huge surges of energy. Or maybe when you periodically experience the truth of His grace in your life. It hits you in an especially deep, penetrating level and you are moved to tears of gratitude. Or sorrow. Or both. All are physical reactions to spiritual occurrences. Whether we have a body or are part-body isn't the issue we are tackling. We are concerned with what we do with our bodies and why.

Ephesians 6:12 says, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." In some ways, this can muddy the waters. It can give us license to ignore the proper caretaking of our bodies, since it's a "spirit" issue anyway. Like when I'm craving several slices of meat-lovers pizza for breakfast. Or when I'm considering sleeping in again rather than working out. My body wants what my body wants and I should give in. Besides, if I look, feel or act unhealthy, well, it doesn't really matter. Man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart (wink-wink), right (wink-wink)?

Or equally bad, Ephesians 6:12 can have us over-spiritualizing everything. *Donuts aren't healthy. Satan doesn't want me to be healthy. So I should never eat a donut ... or meat-lovers pizza ... or sleep in.* Pretty soon we're ascribing morality to things of a neutral nature. This leads to us missing out on things God has given us for our enjoyment. Or even worse, we end up adopting a "works" mentality, performing *for* our approval rather than *living out* our approval.

On the flipside, this verse gives us much comfort. If we are spirit beings first, by default we are physical beings second. That means our battles are spiritual battles that manifest themselves at times physically. Yet we have access to the one who has *already* won the battles. If the *victory* is already His, then we don't do this on our own. He does it for us. We don't rely on our own strength for *any* of it; we rely on His strength for *all* of it.

This should bring us tremendous comfort. It means that this is first a spiritual issue. It means that honoring God with our bodies begins by honoring God with our hearts. To honor God only with our bodies does not really honor Him at all.

Read Matthew 23 and you'll see that Jesus is not a big fan of hypocrisy. What flows naturally out of honoring God in our hearts should be a compulsion to honor Him with our bodies. A desire to bring Him glory in *all* areas of our lives. While this book deals with fitness specifically, because it is a heart issue, the principles are universal. They can be applied to the stewardship of our time, money, gifts, family, jobs, influence, and so on. We are merely stewards. We are, however, His stewards. Therefore, we should be excited that He has chosen us to bring Him glory.

Okay, so how do we do that? How do we honor God with our hearts first? We seek to be fully and only satisfied by Him. You see, the more we are satisfied in Him, the harder it is to be satisfied with anything else. Not food. Not sleep. Not endorphins. Not a fitness-model physique or Samson-like strength. Not a sub-three-hour marathon. Not the compliments of friends. Not a glowing annual check-up. Definitely not the mirror.

Here's the extra cool part. The more we are satisfied in Him, the freer we become. We are freer to enjoy the benefits that come with living a healthier lifestyle. Imagine that! Living a life pleasing to the Lord benefits us. What an amazing design God has for our lives.

My prayer for you for the next 90 days is that you get a glimpse. A glimpse of just how big our God is. A glimpse of how very capable He is to orchestrate all things for His glory. A glimpse of who is with you in the battles of life. A glimpse of a victory that is already won.

A glimpse is all we need. Out of it we have hope. Great hope. For then we see that being completely nourished spiritually compels us to glorify Him physically.

Not out of guilt, but out of gratitude.

Not forcefully, but freely.

Not in tears, but in triumph!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The first thing you should know is that every journey has phases, including a fitness journey. This is especially true for someone who is new to fitness. These phases are part physical, based on the strength you are gaining or stamina that's increasing, weight that you are losing, or _____.

You have to be very careful, though. If you let these results dictate your motivation, you can quickly go to an ugly place emotionally. You have to be on guard. Emotionally there are going to be many ups and downs throughout the 90 days. The goal is to maximize the ups and minimize the downs.

You see, fitness is as much emotional as it is physical, if not more. Again, we can't let the physical results decide for us how we will behave. Neither can we let what we experience emotionally be in charge. That's why it's essential as Christians to first approach our fitness from a spiritual point of view. By allowing God to align our wills to His, the spiritual can power both the physical and emotional.

The phases and their timelines are not identical for everyone, but they're certainly very close for most. By my estimate, there are six such phases. Therefore, as you go through this journey, know that phases are coming. When you are aware of them ahead of time, you will be better equipped to handle them. Below is a summary of each phase:

Weeks 1-3 Fire Phase

You're on fire! Excited to get started. Excited about the new exercise routine and even the nutrition. Excited because you see some physical changes.

Weeks 4-6: Flame Phase

You're still warm, but not nearly as hot as you were in the first phase. Early results start to taper and the realization that this is a lifestyle starts to set in. While you're still interested in the pursuit, the fire has certainly faded to a flame.

Weeks 6-8: Fizzle Phase

Your results have plateaued, which drives you in the wrong direction emotionally. Add to this that the novelty of newness is completely gone and the flame is now barely an ember. **This is the danger zone, where most people fall off the wagon.**

Weeks 8-10: Fortitude Phase

Okay, at this point you're just over it. Bad nutrition, missed workouts, and poor sleep are becoming more regular. To compound matters, your frustration makes you *less* inclined to make the right decisions, not more inclined. This is when it's essential just to keep showing up day after day. Like hitting "the wall" in a marathon, you have to just keep putting one foot in front of the next. **If you do that, some new results start emerging again toward the end of this phase.**

Weeks 10-12: Flare Phase

Your persistence in the previous phase is paying off! You're seeing some new results start to emerge. Furthermore, you're getting into a routine, learning better nutrition, improving your sleep, and nearing the end of the journey. There's light at the end of the tunnel. The feeling of satisfaction and pride gives you a confidence that starts to reignite the fire.

Weeks 12 & 13: Fun Phase

You're realizing the fruits of your labor. **You're learning that hard work works!** Fitness as a lifestyle is now realistic for you, and you're elated that you didn't give up. Your enthusiasm is not only contagious, but you find yourself helping others with their fitness.

Again, these phases aren't identical for everyone, but they hold generally true for most people. By getting ahead of them and expecting them to come, you'll be better equipped for the coming 90 days.

There are many reasons this book is based on a 90-day timeline. First, I think it takes at least that long to build lasting habits, despite what others may say. The longer you consistently do something, the better the chance it sticks.

Also, there are a number of great 90-day workout programs you can do at home. For those programs that are shorter, you can combine them with other programs. Or you can do multiple rounds of the same program. Whatever you decide to do workout-wise, *do not* try to shorten the duration. Commit to the full 90 days of your workouts, your eating program and

the material you read in the devotional. Pray that God would teach you whatever He would like to teach you throughout these three months.

Second, there is a Body Tithe Devotional companion app in your phone's app store (Apple and Google). The app is designed to help reinforce the principles taught in this book. It will remind you what you're learning each day. It will keep you focused on your faith throughout the journey. It will point you back to prayer as you rely on God to power your fitness. The app does not contain the devotional itself. It prompts you for your prayers, meditations, and Daily Spiritual Exercises. (More on Daily Spiritual Exercises in a minute.)

You can also use this material alongside other wellness programs in which you might be participating: group fitness classes, Weight Watchers, running groups, church small groups and Bible studies, your neighborhood walking groups, and so on. The more accountability the better. As a group, you can weave it into your current fitness regimen.

Another way to leverage what you are learning is to visit www.bodytithe.com and register there to join a Challenge Group. These groups use third-party tools for the exercise and nutrition components and operate online through sites like Facebook. There are costs for the tools, but the Challenge Group itself is free. Joining a Challenge Group will give you additional accountability, support, and encouragement. So many people are going through a lot of the same things you are experiencing. Having a faith-focused, like-minded group can do wonders for your confidence and motivation, especially when combined with this book.

Speaking of this material, some clarifications need to be made from the start. This is how I've defined fitness:

$$\textit{Fitness} = \textit{Nutrition} + \textit{Exercise} + \textit{Sleep}$$

Nutrition, exercise, and sleep are not equal, but the sum of their parts will help determine your overall fitness level. So when you read the word "fitness" you need to be thinking, "exercise, nutrition, and sleep."

Third, each week you will have a new "Daily Spiritual Exercise." This exercise is to be practiced every day, throughout the day, for that week. You'll have 13 of these exercises, each one practiced for seven days. *Please do not skip these exercises.*

They are each designed to reinforce what you're learning that week and to keep you focused on the right things. Plus, they help keep the material you're learning relevant throughout the day. Five minutes a day is not

enough. We want to be mindful of it all day. We are building spiritual muscles here! Again, don't short-change yourself or this process by skipping them. If you don't think you can make them a priority now, save the book for a time when you can.

Each day, you will also have a "Prayer" and a "Meditation." They are prayers I felt led to pray after having written the material. If you feel led to pray in a different direction, so be it. I would encourage you, however, to keep the listed meditation for each day. The meditation stems from that day's reading and corresponds with the app.

Finally, I talk about this journey in the context of 90 days. Obviously, our fitness (for good or bad) doesn't stop after that. It's lifelong. My prayer then is that you'll spend your life pursuing His heart. As you do, He will help you work out your fitness with fear and trembling.

WEEK 1 PREVIEW

Names for Jesus

We play a great game around our dinner table. It's called the "*What do you like about?*" game. We go around the table, saying things we like about a family member. It's especially gratifying to hear what the kids say: "Mommy is kind." "Daddy is silly." "Mommy is a hard worker." Or one of my personal faves: "Daddy is a beast." While we can never put into words how much our family means to us, it sure is fun to try.

When you think of some of the most respected Christians of all time, how would you describe them? John the Baptist. Mother Teresa. Jim Elliot. Bill Bright. The Apostle Paul. C.S. Lewis. Billy Graham. Peter. We are in awe of people like this and rightfully so. They were fiercely obedient to the call God placed on their hearts, costing some of them their lives. If we played the "*What do you like about?*" game, we could easily come up with four or five attributes that could sum up the depth of their character.

When we think of Jesus, though, the greatest man of all time, summarizing suddenly gets harder. There just are not enough words in all the languages on Earth. No human descriptions could adequately capture the profundity of who He was and is. But it sure is fun to try.

To get the fun started, we need to look no further than Scripture. Some of the most poignant, descriptive, and apt titles for the only man to have lived perfectly reside there. The only man on whom calendars are founded. The only man to have conquered death. The only man who has the authority to give eternal life.

The more we understand who He is, the better we can rely on Him. The better we rely on Him for our everything, the more we can understand Him. Then we realize that the names attributed to Jesus equip us! They equip us to deal with our jobs, focus on our families, face our trials, and handle our health. All the names of Jesus equip us to bring glory back to God and experience victory ... daily.

Yet, as each name flawlessly portrays the person of Christ, each one is also inadequate on its own — helpful but still only pieces of a much bigger puzzle. Start connecting the pieces, however, and an image appears. A beautiful, overwhelming, and life-shattering glimpse of Christ emerges. However, on this side of heaven, it will only ever be a glimpse. There just aren't enough pieces to complete the puzzle.

But it sure is fun to try.

Daily Spiritual Exercise: Pray Without Ceasing

While Jesus was fully God, he was also fully man, capable of sin just like you and me. He remained sinless because He remained in constant communion with the Father. If the Son of Man needed to be in constant communion with God, how much more do we need it?

We need it in every area of our lives, fitness included. Fitness is a struggle for many, but nothing is a struggle for God. He wants to help you with it and He is more than able. In order for Him to help, though, He needs to be the one to do it on our behalf. He needs to be the one to power it.

Set a reminder on your watch, phone or computer to go off every hour (or even more frequently). This is a reminder to pray, to stay in constant connection with God, to realign your mind, will, and purposes to His. You don't have to stop and drop to your knees (though you can if you'd like). Just converse with Him in your heart and mind. Surrender your will to His and ask for His strength to help you during this fitness journey. We are seeking a permanently open dialogue with God. Do this every day this week and pray that He helps you make it second nature.

Remember: the more we remain in Him, the more victory we will experience in all areas of our lives.

Week 1 Day 1 – Names for Jesus: Cornerstone

Have you ever seen a cornerstone on a historical building? Maybe you've even seen one decorated with a relief or inscription of some kind. These are pretty much ceremonial these days, but in earlier times they had a purpose beyond decoration.

The cornerstone was the first stone set in construction of a foundation requiring masonry. Notice it was not only part of the foundation, but it was the *first* part of the foundation. Since it came before anything else, all the other stones would have been set in reference to it. An imperfect or misplaced cornerstone would alter the position and integrity of the entire structure.

However, using a cornerstone that's true changes everything. One with perfect 90-degree right angles. A building block that has straight edges and level base. Construct your foundation out from there and you'll have a building that can last ... that can stand the test of time.

Understanding the purpose of a cornerstone in biblical times provides context for the significance of this description given to Jesus:

“Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.”
– *Ephesians 2:20 (NLT)*

Jesus certainly needs to be the cornerstone of the church and of our faith. He also needs to be the cornerstone of our goals, motives and intentions, decisions, and ambitions. Since He's the only perfect cornerstone, all other cornerstones by definition are off. They will result in misaligned ambitions, unstable decisions, wobbly motives, and shaky goals that, over time, will crumble. Other cornerstones will always require us to rebuild.

We see this all the time with money, influence or jobs, and certainly with fitness. If the cornerstone of my fitness goals is to impress others, what happens when I fail to get feedback? What if I see someone else who is far more impressive than I am? My focus will become even more self-centered than it already was. If the cornerstone of my fitness is to look better, what happens when I stop seeing results in the mirror? Or if the results I see are never enough? I get discouraged, frustrated, and discontent. From there, I'm likely to compromise my nutrition, exercise or sleep. Nor should “Feeling better” be the cornerstone of our fitness. What happens if we never feel better, if we get hurt or diseased? Our attitude will quickly shift to one of apathy and laziness. When the focus is about us, the building we're erecting

becomes less and less stable. It is unable to survive high winds or the weight of a heavy snow.

This is not to say that having fitness goals is wrong. In fact, I encourage them. They give us quantifiable data to shoot for, measure progress against and can teach us how to make adjustments. They can also reveal how we are wired. However, our goals can also unknowingly trick us. *They* become the purpose for our fitness. That's why goals and focus should never be synonymous. When our goals become our focus, Jesus is not. Before we know it, our goals have become our cornerstone.

However, with Jesus as the cornerstone of our fitness, He can lay the foundation. From that foundation, our reflection of Him might serve as a catalyst for others. Where looking better could be a result, rather than a point of focus. Where feeling better and performing better can be a natural byproduct of our efforts, rather than the emphasis of them.

It's essential to establish this from Day 1. Above all else, our goal should be to honor God with our fitness. We do this *not* by having Jesus merely involved. We do this by making Jesus the cornerstone. Then and only then will we have a foundation that is true. One that is sound, without cracks and unsusceptible to settling. One that is solid, impermeable to torrential downpours and flash floods. One that is strong, sturdy enough to withstand the emotional earthquakes that come with living in an imperfect world.

Sound. Solid. Strong. Certainly a description worthy of our Jesus.

Prayer

"Father, thank You for your son Jesus, the perfect Cornerstone. Thank you that He wants to be at the basis of our lives, decisions, and motives. Will You forgive me when I let the primary focus of my fitness be anything other than Him? Please gently remind me to continually build my faith on Him, a foundation void of cracks, unmovable, and everlasting. Amen."

Meditation

Jesus, the Cornerstone of my faith, the foundation of my life.

Daily Spiritual Exercise

Pray without ceasing.

Week 1 Day 2 - Names for Jesus: Bread of Life

Outside of your genetics, there are three things that will determine your level of fitness: exercise, nutrition, and sleep. Nutrition is arguably the most important. Hippocrates said, "Let food be thy medicine, and medicine be thy food." For the physical body, there's a ton of truth to that. So it's important to focus on learning how to eat smart right from the get-go.

For Christians working on their health, however, I would argue that your spiritual nutrition trumps even your physical nutrition. Since we are early in this fitness journey, now is the time to learn how to feed our bodies spiritually. As you will see in the coming weeks, that's where most of the wars are waged.

There's no more fitting analogy for our spiritual nutrition than Jesus as the "Bread of Life." Now when I think of Jesus as the Bread of Life, it's almost always during Communion. I default to the Last Supper. My mind's eye sees Jesus breaking the bread and telling his disciples to eat it in remembrance of Him.

At our church, we have the great and humbling privilege of taking Communion every week. It's a time I dread and cherish simultaneously. As I'm holding the cup of juice and the piece of bread, I think back on my week. I always fall so short of living the kind of holy life we are called to live. While I know I'm forgiven and there's no condemnation, it's hard not to be a little embarrassed sitting there. I'm confessing the same sin that I've confessed countless times before, asking to be forgiven yet again. At the root of my sin, anyone's sin actually, is the simple failure to be nourished solely by Jesus. It's not all that complicated, really. I've gone away from someone who was given to fulfill and satisfy in favor of something that never will.

So why do I reserve the notion of Jesus as the Bread of Life for weekly Communion? I can ponder it all the time, everywhere, no matter what! Jesus certainly didn't confine it to Communion. In fact, He first referred to himself as the "Bread of Life" in John 6 after He had fed the five thousand, which was well before the Last Supper.

In His perfect timing, after first attending to the physical needs of the people, He focuses on their spiritual needs. He tells His disciples in verse 27: "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." Then He follows up a few verses later with:

"Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'" – verse 35 (NIB)

What would happen if I consistently fed my spirit on the Bread of Life rather than settling for “food that spoils?” I will tell you what would happen, I would not go hungry!

Practically speaking, what does this look like in relationship to our fitness? For starters, it means being alert to the temptation to seek our fulfillment from other sources. When we're having a bad day and we reach for junk food to make us feel better, we're reaching for food that spoils. There's a better option: food that “gives life to the world,” as Jesus stated in John 6:32. He is life, and His life can sustain us spiritually on earth and eternally in heaven.

How do we remain alert? By abiding in Him. By taking on the mind of Christ. By praying without ceasing, listening to His whispers, and responding in obedience.

This also means that we can trust Him to take care of us during the harder times. In John 6:37, Jesus says, “whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” On days when we're not motivated to exercise, perhaps we first need to go to Jesus. We can lay our very real struggle into His very capable hands and watch Him work in us for His glory.

As you're working on your physical nutrition over the course of these 13 weeks, focus first on your spiritual nutrition. Do not reserve the Bread of Life for Sundays. Make it a daily mindset.

While weekly Communion is good, constant communing is better.

Prayer

“Father, thank You for being a source of everlasting fulfillment and endless satisfaction. Will You forgive me when I seek foods that don't satisfy ... rather than your Son who does? Please give me wisdom with my health. Even more importantly, help me grow spiritually as I seek to honor You with my body. Amen.”

Meditation

Jesus, You are the Bread of Life.

Daily Spiritual Exercise

Pray without ceasing.

Week 1 Day 3 – Names for Jesus: Radiance of God's Glory

Grasping the concept of the Trinity is hard and rightfully so. Our human minds struggle to understand the basics of a pre-earth timelessness (Psalm 90:2) or a post-earth eternity (Psalm 93:1-5). Then try comprehending how Jesus was both fully God and fully human simultaneously. Once you've mastered that, factor in how the Holy Spirit fits into the picture.

That's one reason I love the following verse so much. Not only does it paint a beautiful picture, it breaks down the relationship for us, making it easier to understand:

“The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”
– *Hebrews 1:3 (NIV)*

Radiance, or brightness, comes from the Greek word *apaugasma*, meaning “to send forth light.” God's glory was manifested in Jesus, “the representation of his being.” Jesus was sent forth, yet never separated from God the Father, as they are the same (John 4:9-11).

John MacArthur puts it like this: “Just as the sun was never without and cannot be separated from its brightness, so God was never without and cannot be separated from the glory of Christ. Never was God without Him or He without God, and never in any way can He be separated from God. Yet the brightness of the sun is not the sun. Neither is Christ God in that sense. He is fully and absolutely God, yet is a distinct Person.”

That means, by Jesus we have the means to relish God's light, the light of the world.

Every now and then, people will pay me a compliment by saying that I inspire them with their fitness. While I appreciate the sentiment, I cringe a little on the inside. I see this all the time on social media: someone who wants to be an “inspiration” for others. Yuck.

Our goal as Christians is not to be an “inspiration” but to be a “reflection.” When we seek to inspire, the focus is on what we do. When we seek to reflect, it's on what God does. Inspiration is secondary. It's a by-product, not the goal.

Like the moon, we have no light source of our own. On our own, we do no good thing. We have no good thing (Psalm 16:2). We are solely dependent on the sun as our source of light. However, when we seek to reflect the Son,

Jesus in us, working through us, He lights the way for others. He illuminates the darkness. He shines into hearts and makes them glow.

As you go through this journey, you will make some significant strides. You will be diligent with your nutrition and exercise. You'll prioritize your sleep and be refreshed from your rest. You will get noticeably more fit. As you enjoy these benefits of a healthy life, you will also inadvertently inspire others. When they bring this to your attention, the challenge is to find a way to reflect this back to God.

After all, we can't do this without Him. Jesus was quick to point back to His Father (Mark 10:18). We too should be quick to point back to our Jesus, because as Hebrews 1:3 concludes, He is sustaining all things ... us included. We can do no good thing apart from him.

We are the moon.

Prayer

"Father, thank You sending the Light, your Son, the radiance of your Glory, to earth to give us hope and a future. Will You forgive me when I seek to inspire rather than reflect? Please give me the integrity and honesty to keep You as the source of my strength. Amen."

Meditation

Jesus is the Radiance of God's glory.

Daily Spiritual Exercise

Pray without ceasing.

Week 1 Day 4 – Names for Jesus: Rabbi

When you hear the name “Jesus,” what’s the first thing that comes to mind?

I’d venture to guess most people think of “Lord,” “Son,” or “Savior.” Certainly they are all apt titles, but they weren’t the most popular during His life on earth. The title he received more than any other by far was “Rabbi,” which means “teacher”:

“He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.’” – John 3:2a (NIV)

As a sign of respect, His apostles addressed him this way, which certainly was not uncommon for the day. However, fast-forward two thousand years and it still is applicable for us. After all, everywhere He went He taught in such a way that we’re still learning from Him. However, while most teachers have certain strengths, Jesus had no weaknesses; He was equally powerful whether He was teaching by word, by deed, or by example.

First, when you study the words Rabbi used, you quickly come to realize that He was a master wordsmith. His words were chosen with purpose, structured to shed light, bring life, stir the conscious, and create change. They were relatable. For instance, when talking to fishermen, Rabbi said He’d make them fishers of men (Matthew 4:19). His words were thought-provoking, as when He says that He didn’t come to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). His words were challenging, as when Rabbi tells the disciples to love their enemies and do good for them (Luke 6:35). Certainly the Rabbi’s parables were profound. Some go on to brand the heart for generations untold, as with the parable of the prodigal son.

However, as they say, “talk is cheap.” Rabbi’s words would have been hollow too had they not been supported by His deeds. Of course, this was not the case. In fact, His deeds magnified the truth of His words, and vice versa. Wherever He went, Rabbi had compassion. This compassion resulted in attending to the physical needs of the people by miracles of healing (Matthew 15:30), feeding (Matthew 15:32-38), and resurrections (John 11:43-44).

Rabbi’s compassion also resulted in more teaching. For instance, we read in Mark 6:34, “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.” Notice His compassion came first. It led Him to begin teaching (and eventually multiplying the fish and bread). Teaching was the deed that magnified the truth of Rabbi’s compassion.

Rabbi spoke perfectly, acted perfectly and by doing, He set the perfect example for us to follow. Sometimes, His example was impactful not because of what He said or did. It was because of what He didn't say or do. For instance, when Mary joins Jesus at her brother's tomb, John 11:35 tells us that "Jesus wept." He didn't tell her everything was going to be okay, though it was. He didn't set out to fix the situation, though it got fixed. He chose to empathize with Mary first. In so doing, He demonstrates that He can commiserate with our every emotion even while He can mend every situation. Rabbi teaches us that sometimes our loved ones just need to be listened to and understood.

We also see this principle played out in John 8. A woman caught in adultery, sentenced to be stoned, was first brought to Jesus. Yet rather than doing the expected, Rabbi did nothing. Rabbi withheld condemnation. He teaches us the unproductive nature of judging others. We again learn from Rabbi by what He didn't do.

Then, in the most perfect of all teaching moments, by word, deed, and example, Rabbi took our place on the cross. Rather than ruling by might, He serves in grace. All in one single act, He educated us on benevolence, humility, love, and sacrifice.

Over the course of this journey, if we are open, listening, and malleable, we will not stop learning from Rabbi. There is no end to the wisdom that can be found in His words. Even today, His words and the words of His Father are alive and active (Hebrews 4:12). Even at this very moment we can be trained in righteousness. We can be equipped for every good work, thanks to the life of Rabbi (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Change, however, only happens if we let it. Knowledge is only helpful if we apply it. True spiritual growth only occurs if we allow Rabbi's words to penetrate and if we let the Holy Spirit work within us, if we permit the principles found in God's word to shape our lives.

Consider adding "Rabbi" to the list of names you'd give Jesus. After all, in the history of everything that has ever been, no teacher can impact your heart, mind, and will as Rabbi can.

Prayer

"Father, thank You for giving us Rabbi, the perfect teacher. Will You forgive me when I don't listen to what He's trying to teach me? Please keep enlightening His words in my heart and mind. Give me a willing spirit to put them into practice. Amen."

Meditation

From your teaching, Rabbi, I can never stop learning.

Daily Spiritual Exercise

Pray without ceasing.

Week 1 Day 5 – Names for Jesus: The Shepherd and the Lamb

We have a wonderful little Chihuahua-pug mix we adopted from a rescue shelter in 2003. When we got her, there weren't many, ahem, "chugs" around. She has a thick yellow coat, stocky frame, and the infamous curly tail. Her face is composed of small, soft ears with big, brown eyes overlooking a short, brown snout. At about 30 pounds, she is bigger than a traditional pug, but she's still all raspy bark, no bite. Based on her look we imagined that if she could talk, she'd have a German accent. So, we named her "Gertie," short for Gertrude.

Gertie acclimated to our then-family of three in no time. She has also been a perfect big sister to the three children we've added since. Sweet, mostly obedient, fun and easy to take care of, she has been the perfect dog for us. While she loves everyone, she is especially drawn to me. I was the one to learn she was available at the animal shelter. I also happened to be the one to first go visit her and also the one to bring her home. On some level, it seems like Gertie knows that I saved her. Consequently, she parked her ultimate allegiance with me. She greets me when I come home. She obeys when I command. She comes when I call. When we get back from a vacation, I get the lion's share of the kisses. When I say her name, her little triangle ears perk. She knows my voice and I know her bark.

Jesus has a similar relationship with us. We see this demonstrated in John 10, when He uses the analogy of the Shepherd and the sheep:

"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me..." – verse 14 (NIV)

Throughout that passage in John, Jesus talks about what a shepherd does for the sheep. He calls them, defends them, leads them and ultimately would die for them. It's the perfect analogy to use because sheep are helpless, desperate, and dumb. Compared to our Shepherd, so are we. We are the Gerties of the world, needing to be defended, rescued, adopted, and loved. We need help.

As Gertie has gotten up there in years, she too has needed more and more help. Cysts removed. Teeth extracted. Blood tests, kidney tests and a daily supplement regimen to prevent future issues. The days of her being an inexpensive pet are long over. That said, she's worth it. She is a part of our family. Honestly, there's not much I wouldn't do for her.

However, I wouldn't die for her. As much as I love her, I wouldn't lay my life down for hers. That's where the similarities end between our pets and us, and us and our Shepherd ... He would die for us. He did die for us:

“... just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep...” – John 10:15 (NIV)

Jesus is not merely our Shepherd. In fact, before we ever read about the Good Shepherd, we see John refer to Him as a lamb. In John 1:29 we read, “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” John calls Him “Lamb of God” again six verses later.

You know what? It only makes sense. Who else could be two opposite entities at the same time: the Shepherd and the Lamb? Who else could fully express the qualities of contrary lives without diminishing the relevance of either of them? If He weren't the Shepherd and the Lamb, the contrast to sin and the sacrifice for it, why trust Him? Would He be worth putting our hope in if He had to be confined to one virtue at a time? Would He be worth putting our faith in for our earthly living, let alone our eternal salvation?

As with Gertie, we have been rescued, adopted, and loved. We can be cared for, looked out after, and given what we need. We can have a family and a Father.

Unlike Gertie's “father,” however, ours has the ability to empower our lives for eternity, while energizing our lives on earth. God can fuel our fitness, shape our focus, and strengthen our resolve. He can sharpen our perspective with the assurance of what his Son Jesus has done and will do for us.

He is both the doctor and the medicine. The teacher and the lesson. The ransom and the reward. The sun and the shade. The artist and the art. The demand and the supply. The Giver and the Gift. He's everything we need and nothing we don't.

He is the Shepherd and He is the Lamb.

Prayer

“Father, thank You for sending your Shepherd-Son to be the sacrificial Lamb. Will You forgive me when You call and I don't come? Please help me to follow You, because only You are worth following.”

Meditation

You lead and I will follow.

Daily Spiritual Exercise

Pray without ceasing.

Week 1 Day 6 – Names for Jesus: The Author

When you look at the story of your life, what perspective do you take? I think the temptation for most people is to look at it with a top-down view. With a vague deference given to some of the obvious age breaks, your life probably gets grouped into sections like this: childhood, high school and college, single, married, children, and so on. At the risk of making you hungry, it's as if we're looking at a piece of lasagna only from the top. We see a long rectangle, with a beginning, middle, and end (maybe some red sauce on the sides too). It's one-dimensional.

What we should be doing is looking at the lasagna from the side. Our lives are stories on top of stories on top of stories, like repeating layers of sauce, noodles, meat, and cheese. Take just one day, just one forkful, and you'll see a cross-section of stories stacked on top of one another: stories of relationships with your spouse, children, friends, and loved ones. Stories of a long work transition you've been going through and of a home improvement project you've been tackling. Stories of the volunteer work you've been doing and stories of the time spent at T-ball. Stories of your Bible reading routine in the morning and of your downtime television habit at night. With each bite, the story continues.

Where there is a story, there is an author. The stories of our lives are no different. What should be different for Christians, however, is we should entrust the plot to a much better writer than ourselves. After all, it's only prudent to hand over the pen to the One who invented the medium.

We see this description in Acts 3, when Peter addressed the crowd who had just seen him heal a lame man. He reminded them that it wasn't Peter who healed the man. It was Jesus, "the author of life." That same author, Jesus, can also be the author of our life.

The Author of Life is also known as the Author of Salvation, as we see in the 1984 NIV translation of Hebrews 2:10: "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering." Wow! Read this part again: "for whom and through whom everything exists..." That's why we are here. That's how we are here. We are here by Him and through Him. It's by His Son's suffering that our salvation has been authored.

Then, later in Hebrews, we're once again implored to turn to Jesus:

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its

shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”
– Hebrews 12:2 (NIV)

Jesus authored eternal life by authoring salvation. He will author and perfect our faith as well, until we are united with Him again someday. The “until” is the hard part. The “until” is where we live out our days. It’s the “until” that requires patience and perseverance. The good news is they don’t come by our own hand. As we see over and over, the challenge is to relinquish the compulsion to write our own story.

With this fitness journey, you are starting another story, adding another layer. There are likely threads of fitness endeavors throughout the cross-section of your life. Perhaps what makes this story different is you’ve decided you will no longer be the one holding the pen. That lack of control makes you nervous but excited. The faith required to loosen your grip only adds to the passion and exhilaration of the tale He wants to tell. A story of trial and triumph. Of narrow escapes and grand victories. Of a life lived with courage, peace, and power.

Furthermore, when we are not responsible for writing the plot, we actually have more freedom, not less. When we no longer shoulder the burden of worry, fear or anxiety, we’re freer to enjoy the process of Him perfecting our faith. We have but one concern: obedience, which is why we fix our eyes on the Son.

So, drop the pen. Put down the paper. You’ve surrendered the right to write any more. It’s time to acknowledge that there’s someone better suited for the task. A skilled wordsmith. A master creator.

A life giver, salvation maker, faith shaper, and perfect author.

Prayer

“Father, thank You for giving me life and having a purpose for it. Will You forgive me when I’m determined to write my own story? Please help me to remain faithful, fixed on your Son, following in faithful obedience. Amen.”

Meditation

Your hand writes my story.

Daily Spiritual Exercise

Pray without ceasing.

Week 1 Day 7 – Names for Jesus: Morning Star

I don't know about you, but I am not a morning person. Doesn't matter how early I go to bed or the restfulness of my sleep. Getting up early is just not my thing. So, I'm stuck with the commotion of noisy children, work tasks, to-do lists, and workouts to jolt me out of bed.

I wish getting up early did agree with me. I think my days would go smoother if I eased into reality. Plus, evidence suggests the most productive people are those who do get up well before the sun rises. More than that, there is an almost magical peace about an early morning: the space between night and light, before the world wakes up and the stars go to sleep. With dew resting, dawn rising and nature harmonizing, early mornings invite an introspective solitude that's nourishing, even if for just a moment.

Perhaps that's why the names of Jesus that relate Him to the morning resonate with me. They depict an intangible yet experiential quality that I desire to characterize my days. Depending on your translation, Luke 1:78 refers to Jesus as “the Dawn from on high,” “the dayspring,” “the morning light,” and “the rising sun.” In Malachi 4:2, we read, “the Sun of Righteousness arise...” Then, in 2 Peter 1:19 and later in Revelation, perhaps the most appropriate and poetic of the bunch — “the morning star”:

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this message for the churches. I am both the source of David and the heir to his throne. I am the bright morning star.” – Revelation 22:16 (NLT)

Some interesting notes about the morning star. For starters, it isn't actually a star at all. It's Venus. Of course, Venus is a planet and therefore does not produce any light of its own. It reflects the light of the sun. It's so good at reflecting the sun that Venus can even be seen during some of the brightest days. It's called “the morning star” because it precedes the sun morning ... after morning ... after morning.

As we learn more about the Morning Star, we start seeing why it's such a fitting description for Jesus. First, Jesus's life on earth preceded the fulfillment and establishment of the heavenly Kingdom. While He was the light of the world, Jesus reflected His Father, staying in perfect communion with Him. Jesus shined brighter than anyone before Him or since. Just as celestial bodies do, Jesus gives direction. He helps us set our bearings.

If our fitness is to be successful, both physically and spiritually, the Morning Star will need to be our compass. Fortunately for us, His example shines morning ... after morning ... after morning. Jesus models and provides the

consistency we need to seek in our fitness. We can set our sights on Him as the focus and destination of the journey. Then we can rely on the wisdom from the Holy Spirit to figure out the mechanics of it.

In the beginning, this is often easier because of the newness of the journey. Yet the excitement shouldn't only be in the newness of the process, but rather in the process itself, that every morning we are given a new day with another opportunity to pursue God-honoring body stewardship.

In so doing, we will be given opportunities to shine in one of two ways. One, we can try to inspire others by our example and in so doing, take the credit for the progress. That, however, results in being a mere flicker in the dark.

The other option is give the glory back to God. We can give Him credit for what He has done for us, in us, and through us. Then, we reflect His light, rather than trying to produce any of our own. Then, we are like His Son. Then, we can shine with a true brilliance that never ends and never dims.

That brilliance allows us to experience the supernatural peace of Jesus, a peace that surpasses understanding. We can experience the Creator of night and light. We experience the One who spins the world awake and put the stars to sleep. We experience the One who drops the dew on the grass, breaks the dawn and orchestrates the rhythms of nature. We get to do this with the One who invites us into a loving relationship that completely nourishes the soul ... for life. We can do this day ... after day ... after day ... so that it characterizes our lives.

With entire days like that, who needs mornings?

Prayer

"Father, thank You for sending your Son to be The Morning Star. Will You forgive me when I model my life on anything other than Him? Please help me to keep Him as the source of my efforts. Amen."

Meditation

The Morning Star is the focus and the foundation of my fitness.

Daily Spiritual Exercise

Pray without ceasing.

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MATTHEW PRYOR is a personal trainer, writer, and founder of BodyTithe.com and HomeFitnessGurus.com. His popular insights are shared through various media channels nationwide. Matthew, his wife Kim, and their four children, live in LaGrange, Kentucky.

