

## The Devotional Dilemma

*Michael Hochstetler, Counselor*



Many Christians find it hard to have a meaningful devotional life. They may feel that God is far away when they pray. They may lose focus or get distracted when reading the Bible. They may wonder if they are spiritual enough or if they are truly saved because their devotions seem dry and empty. While many believers do enjoy a rich and satisfying devotional life, for

others the experience is disappointing. What are the reasons for devotional dryness, and what can we do about it? Here are some insights I have gained from others and from wrestling with my own devotional struggles.

### *Devotional dryness can result from unresolved guilt.*

Many Christians feel a continual nagging that they never have devotions often enough—which makes them even less motivated. While guilt can nudge us toward change, Satan uses it to keep us from the spiritual nourishment we so desperately need. Personal devotions can become an obligation, a “box to check,” another item on a long to-do list without any desire or meaning. This makes us even less motivated, causing even more guilt—and around it goes. The good news is that we always have today to start afresh. There are better reasons for spending time with God than easing a guilty conscience.

### *Devotional dryness can result from lack of preparation.*

Sometimes when we have devotions we are already stressed, tired, or distracted. It is easy to begin reading or praying without taking time to quiet our hearts and enter God’s presence. This results in prayer that is unsatisfying or Bible reading that doesn’t really nourish the spirit. A few moments of preparation can remedy this. Stretch and take a few deep breaths. Relax tense muscles. Sit in silence for a few minutes if the mind is racing or distracted. Pray before beginning, asking for God’s blessing. It is surprising what a little preparation can do to improve the quality of time spent with God.

*Devotional dryness can result from focusing on feelings rather than faith.* Many Christians are disturbed because they do not feel close to God. They see themselves as unspiritual or question their salvation. This makes it hard to get anything out of prayer

or the Scriptures. Focusing on feelings often causes God to seem even more distant. The less I feel God’s presence, the more I question my faith, and the more I question my faith, the less I feel His presence. Taking our focus off of feelings and onto Christ can help get us back on track. By refocusing our attention to what Scripture says, without worrying about how we feel, we can remove the barriers to the word of God and let it work in our hearts.

*Devotional struggles can result from unprocessed emotions.* Focusing on feelings is unhelpful, but so is avoiding them. If God seems distant or prayer seems empty, it may be because of unresolved worry, pain, or anger that has built up inside. Stuffing emotions doesn’t make one close to anybody—including the Lord. If God does not seem near, could it be because we are holding our deepest feelings at arm’s length? Naming feelings and bringing them to God can transform one’s prayer life. God is profoundly interested in our anger, our grief, and our worry, and invites us to share these things with Him. The Bible is full of emotionally honest prayers. We should never be too “spiritual” to be real with our Heavenly Father!

### *Devotional struggles can result from a lack of variety.*

It is easy to get into a rut with prayer and Bible reading. They can become routine and dull if they are always done in the same way. If you feel stuck in your devotional life, it may be time to try something new. Try listening to audio Bibles if you have always relied on reading, or prayer journaling if you have always prayed out loud. Try different postures or settings. Using several Bible translations can be very helpful, provided they are sound and faithful to the original. Using only one translation can limit your experience with God’s Word. God is a God of infinite creativity; why shouldn’t we be creative in how we approach Him?

The best motivator for personal devotions is the knowledge that God earnestly desires rich fellowship with us. In the words of Oswald Smith:

*God is waiting in the silence, | For a heart that He can fill;  
He must find it cleansed and empty, | With a spirit calm and still.*

*God is waiting in the silence, | Oh, to know that He is near!  
Earth recedes and heaven opens, | God is waiting, God is here.*

## Where Love and Sorrow Meet

Darla Hackman, Counselor



*See, from His head, His hands, His feet,  
Sorrow and love flow mingled down.*

*Did e'er such love and sorrow meet?  
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

-Isaac Watts, 1707

Sorrow and love, pain and beauty—these themes feel at odds with each other. And yet, is that not true of so much of life? As much as we want to define experiences as good or bad, as much as we want the sweet to cancel out the bitter, this reality remains—beauty and pain often coexist. As the words to this familiar hymn, “When I Survey the Wonderous Cross,” so poignantly illustrates, our Savior’s sacrificial love embodies this paradox. Here at the cross—where sorrow and love meet, where grief and gratitude collide—is our reason for greatest worship. In our own stories, we are also invited to worship in the places where our pain and beauty meet.

Life has times of deep valleys and glorious mountaintops. Sometimes it feels like we host spaces of joy or sorrow; but many times it’s not one or the other, it’s both.

This theme shows up in my life and the lives of those who enter my office. It plays out spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and even physically. The tension is real when a lavishly beautiful experience stirs a deep ache, perhaps for a loved one who is absent or whose choices leave us burdened. Or perhaps physical limitations or a health journey bring suffering and struggle, and yet we learn things about Jesus’

goodness and presence that we may miss otherwise. It can be exhausting to live with the tension of both.

Perhaps our call is to hold out our open hands, willing to accept both the hard and the good. To honestly embrace both, grieving our losses with the Comforter and gratefully enjoying our gifts with the Giver.

I often think about how God has given us two hands. With one hand, I hold, receive, and accept the good, the beautiful, the delightful, the rich pieces of life. They are treasures I want to enjoy and celebrate, holding gently with an open hand.

With the other hand, I hold, receive, and accept the broken, the hard, the disappointments, the painful pieces of life. These too, I want to gently hold with an open hand. They don’t cancel each other out or discredit each other. I don’t need to minimize one or maximize the other. I can honestly face what is simultaneously true in those moments.

Paul tells us that when we share in Christ’s suffering, we also share in the goodness of the comfort He offers us (2 Corinthians 1:5-7). Maybe, as I hold both the joy and the sorrow with my Savior who also embodied both, it leads me to sacred places of worship. Embracing the pain and beauty concurrently allows me to know my Savior in rich, meaningful ways that deepen my intimacy with Him.

Redemption was made possible when sorrow and love met on the cross. What happens in your life at the intersection of sorrow and love?

## Father/Son Retreat Reflections

I was grateful to be part of the Father/Son Retreat again this year. We had the perfect weather for the weekend! We started the weekend by selecting our spot for setting up the tent. Next, we met other father and son teams that came for the same reason we did—to spend quality time with each other. We enjoyed frisbee football, fireside time, and the various other planned activities. My favorite activity was the father/son devotion and alone time. The weekend encouraged and challenged my fathering skills.

-Dave and son Mark Zook

The opportunity to attend the Father/Son Retreat this year was a special blessing to us. Being with other fathers who felt the importance of investing time in their sons was inspiring. One thing I became more aware of was how much my son wants to be heard and understood. The time we fathers had together to share and reflect on our past and talk about the future of our families was powerful, although stretching at times. One area I feel I’ve grown in through this time with my son is seeing more of the importance of spending one-on-one time with my children.

-Derek Weiler, dad

I enjoyed the games and fishing in the pond.

-Andre Weiler, son



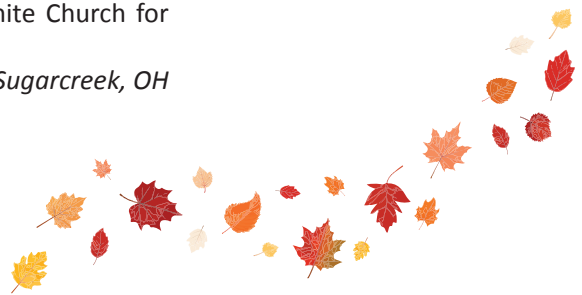
## Rocky Mountain Men's Retreat Reflections

Unplugging from the cares of this world and spending time with men within the wilderness of the Father's creation is best described as revitalizing. We laughed, cried, shared, cared, encouraged, and helped each other to greater heights as men. From the moments up the mountain with Brownie, my horse, to the incredible views over the ranges and valleys, and to the fresh HUCKLEBERRIES—it was nothing short of life-giving. One of my highlights was alone-time on top of the mountain. I couldn't help but notice the ants scurrying around, the raven soaring by and even the flowers displaying their glory. With a tear in my eye, I realized the Father's desire for my heart as a man, not as the world defines it, but as He created it to be.

-Allen Miller, DeKalb, TX

If you find yourself in need of refreshment, fellowship, clearing of the mind, a disconnection from your cell phone, and a renewed connection with the Creator of this beautiful universe, the Rocky Mt Men's Retreat will accomplish all the above. Some of the things that impacted me were the group sessions with Sam Gingerich, the life stories of my fellow campers, and the prayer and sharing times that we experienced. I came away from this weekend with a greater appreciation for God as Creator, a refreshed mind, a renewed spirit, and a determination to stay more disconnected from all the media threads that cloud my thinking and occupy valuable brain space. A huge "thank you" to Life Counseling Ministries and to the Kootenai Valley Mennonite Church for hosting this event. It was certainly a life-impacting experience for me.

-Shawn Miller, Sugarcreek, OH



*Thank You*

*...for your prompt and generous response to our matching fund challenge! The challenge has been met in full. Your gift enables our staff to walk with people struggling with the complexities of life and to offer them hope and comfort through Jesus. God bless you for sharing!*

### LETTING GO:

#### *A Portrait of a Woman at Rest*

This course offers married women practical Biblical tips on how to be happy, respectful, empowered wives. This six-week online intensive course involves daily interactive emails, one group Zoom call per week, and journaling homework.

Coaches: Cathie Gingerich and Sharon Kuepfer

#### **NEXT COURSE DATES:**

OCTOBER 9 – NOVEMBER 20 (Filled)

JANUARY 1 – FEBRUARY 12, 2024

MARCH 18 – APRIL 29, 2024

MAY 27 – JULY 6, 2024

For more information, contact Lorinda at  
lorindan@life-ministries.com  
Phone: 717.871.0540

### PRAYER & PRAISE

#### *Praise God for...*

- Relational connectedness and safety during Father/Son Retreat and Rocky Mountain Men's Retreat
- Our faithful prayer warriors
- The ladies that participated in the Ladies' Intensive group this summer
- God's loving provision through His generous people

#### *Pray for...*

- Upcoming Psych 1 & Psych 2 seminars in September and Counselor Training Workshop (Core 1, Lab 1) in November.
- Physical, emotional, and spiritual strength for staff
- Clients walking through mental health challenges

## Fare Ye Well, Katrina!

Katrina Driver joined the office team as a receptionist in July 2020 and transitioned to interim counselor the beginning of 2023. She completed her master's degree in counseling this past spring and is leaving us to finish up her internship elsewhere, and then on to God's next assignment, which is currently unclear.

Katrina exudes the sweet spirit of Jesus. Clients and staff alike experienced her gentle, caring presence in both the office and the counseling room. We will miss her insightful and gracious contribution and wish her God's grace and peace as she pursues what she deeply cares about—bringing Jesus to those who are hurting.



## Upcoming Events

### ANNOUNCING

We are offering a 3-day seminar in April of 2024 on three different topics related to mental health, including OCD & religious scrupulosity. These will be taught by three mental health professionals and are intended for pastors and people-helpers. Look for more details in the next newsletter.

### 2023 TEN-COURSE SUBJECTS

Psych 1 - September 20-22, 2023

Psych 2 - September 27-29, 2023

Core 1/Lab 1 - November 9-11, 2023  
(Registration Closed)

*Night of Music will not be running this year*



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Life Counseling Ministries is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization established to provide counseling for individuals, marriages, families, and church leaders. LCM also offers training and teaching through workshops and seminars. This newsletter is published quarterly and is available to interested persons at no cost.

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