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Get Out of a Spiritual Rut

Here's what you need
to know to get moving
in the right direction.



Get Out of a Spiritual Rut

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Introduction

Gravel Travel

By Dana Wilkerson



I grew up in the country, and during my teenage years I spent many an evening cruising the back roads of my county. In some places, back roads are paved. Not where I come from. Ours are gravel.

There are several interesting things about gravel roads. First, there are rarely any stop signs at intersections (you just watch for a moving cloud of dust and keep on truckin'). Second, if there is a posted speed limit, it's never followed. And third, you quickly learn that it's an easier and more comfortable ride if you drive in the ruts. It becomes an automatic thing to just hit the ruts and cruise along.



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Driving in the ruts may give you a smoother ride, and it may help to keep you from sliding off into the ditch when you're traveling at a high speed (not that I would know that from experience, of course). However, there can be some major drawbacks to staying in those ruts. If you're not acquainted with gravel roads, let me explain that most of them have one set of ruts—right down the middle of the road.

Knowing that, you can imagine one reason why it might not always be prudent to stay in those ruts. You will inevitably find yourself in a game of "chicken" with one of the local farmers. And his mode of transportation is probably much larger than yours. Reason number two for staying out of the ruts is that if the ruts get deep, you just might bottom out and find yourself stuck in the middle of the road—your wheels are spinning, but you're going absolutely nowhere.

That sounds a lot like what happens to me when I get stuck in a spiritual rut. I get complacent; I get lazy; I get bored. I just cruise right along in my comfy little ruts without any thought for the state of my life or anything that might be coming my way. When I get this way, one of two things usually happens. Either my efforts don't provide any results, or I get hit head-on with something I can't handle on my own.





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Proverbs 1:32 says, "The complacency of fools will destroy them." Just like complacently driving in a rut can end in disaster, so can living life in a spiritual rut. Doing what's automatic or comfortable may not be the best thing for our spiritual lives. Let's make sure we don't destroy our spiritual lives by being complacent or too comfortable with where we are. Let's get out of those ruts!

In this collection of articles, you'll get plenty of practical advice from people who have been in those ruts we all find ourselves in from time to time. I pray they will encourage you in your own spiritual journey.

Blessings,

Dana Wilkerson

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use “Get Out of a Spiritual Rut” for a group study



“**G**et Out of a Spiritual Rut” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the “Reflect” questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**

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Surviving a Spiritual Dry Spell

How others get out of the rut.



Whether it's because of an overwhelming to-do list or challenging circumstances, we all go through times when God seems far away. If you've felt like that, or you're going through a dry time right now, don't lose hope. You're not alone. And here's how women like you have moved beyond a spiritual rut. Let these words of encouragement comfort as they lead you in a new direction.





Get Out of a Spiritual Rut

Surviving a Spiritual Dry Spell

Just weeks after being on a spiritual high, I felt depressed and in need of a sign of God's presence in my life. But as I began reading my journal, I found examples of other times God had revealed his presence in my life when I'd been discouraged. Thumbing through my journal entries helps me remember how many times God has shown me his love.

—Sharron McDonald, Arkansas

During a time of pain and spiritual frustration, my pastor reminded me that I didn't have to sit around doing nothing while I waited for God to answer my prayers. I could still find joy by serving others. So I called the church to find out where I could help and started volunteering with the children's church. While it stretched my comfort zone, God met me there. By actively serving instead of passively waiting, I soon discovered I was out of my "desert" and filled with spiritual excitement!

—Sondra Salazar, California

To get back on track, I post encouraging Scriptures on my mirror. Then I spend some time alone writing God a letter, telling him why I'm distant and dry. I also meditate on his goodness, or call a friend to talk about what's happening in my spiritual life.

—Carmen Mancinelli, Pennsylvania





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When I talk to a friend who hasn't experienced God's love and forgiveness, I'm reminded of all I have in Christ. It brings me back to God and his Word, because I need to rely on him when I share my faith. Most of all, it's exciting to see what God can do through my actions.

—Dawn C. Pitsch, Washington

I always assumed the older I was and the longer I was a Christian, the closer to God I'd feel. I never imagined there would be times when I'd feel as if God didn't care about me—but there are. Yet I've come to recognize certain truths exist whether I feel their reality or not. First, God loves me and is with me every step of the way. Second, God desires to use the good *and* the difficult to fashion me into his image. Third, God uses other people to remind me of his faithfulness. Finally, it's helpful to have a few Christian women who understand me, pray with me, and encourage me. When I take God at his Word—regardless of my circumstances—I rediscover an intimacy with him I would miss if I relied solely on what I see and feel.

—Patty Stump, Arizona

God seemed distant to me after my third child was born. I had a newborn baby, a 17-month-old, and a toddler. On top of this, my husband's job was stressful, and he couldn't take time off to help after our daughter came home from the hospital. I felt completely alone. During those times, I placed a Bible where I could see it during the day to serve as a visible reminder of God's promise to never leave or forsake me. Just having it





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near brought me comfort. Soon I began recalling verses I'd read prior to my dry spell, and I eventually began praying again. My attitude softened as I realized what a privilege it is to call on God with my every need. I'm thankful he's there to walk with me through the joys of life—as well as the struggles.

—Kristen Szweda, Wisconsin

I shake a spiritual dry spell by immersing myself in the Psalms. Then I listen to praise and worship CDs. I crank one up when I'm in the shower and sing along, thanking God for his gifts. Above all, I pray, telling God I need his help to get out of this slump. After all, he's the only One who has the cure!

—Teresa Wells, Texas

Just as school children begin their day with the Pledge of Allegiance, I decided to do the same. I wrote my own pledge of allegiance to God, and I now say it daily. After searching the Bible for verses to use in my "pledge," I began emerging from a season of doubt with a new sense of God's presence.

—Lynn Lind, New Mexico

This article first appeared in the July/August 2001 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





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Surviving a Spiritual Dry Spell

Reflect

- *Do you keep a spiritual journal? Why or why not? If so, do you look back through it to remember how God has worked? If not, do you think it would help if you started?*
- *One contributor said, "I always assumed the older I was and the longer I was a Christian, the closer to God I'd feel." Do you make the same assumption? Do you think it's a faulty assumption? Why or why not?*
- *Which one of the suggestions do you think would be most beneficial for you to get out of a spiritual rut? Why? Make a commitment to follow that suggestion.*





I Don't Feel Close to God

How to intensify your time with God.

By Jim Burns

My devotion time used to be really intense, but now it has simmered down. At times, I feel like God isn't there. And even when I do have my time with God, there doesn't seem to be any passion in it. What should I do?

I want to encourage you to try something I call the 90-Day Experiment. Challenge yourself to spend five minutes a day with God for the next 90 days. When you complete the experiment, I can't promise you'll burn with passion for God every morning. But I do think such a disciplined approach will help you recover a devotion time you won't want to miss.



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I Don't Feel Close to God

Exactly what you do during those five minutes is up to you, but here are some ideas to help get you started. A good devotional book may help you break out of some boring patterns. Or maybe you are a person who does better if you journal and write out your prayers to God. That's fine. You might try singing Christian praise songs as part of your daily routine. You could even read through the New Testament. Yeah, it might sound overwhelming, but it only takes two or three chapters a day to do it in 90 days.

What I'm saying is this: If what you're doing now isn't working, try something different. Mix things up. Be creative. Sure, it will still require incredible discipline to accomplish the 90-Day Experiment no matter what you do. But breaking out of your old devotional rut will give you the motivation you need to get going again. And I guarantee it will be worth it.

Nineteen years ago, I was feeling just like you, so I challenged myself to the 90-Day Experiment. I've never stopped, and I've never regretted it. Of course, I've missed some days along the way, but that time with God has made a huge difference in my relationship with him.

I've read it takes three weeks to form a habit, and three more weeks to solidify that habit as a lifelong practice. If you successfully complete the 90-Day Experiment, chances are you'll develop a routine with lasting significance. Go for it. Take the challenge. You'll be glad you did.

Jim is an author, longtime youth worker, and founder of HomeWord, a group seeking to honor God through strong families. This article first appeared in the July/August 1999 issue of CAMPUS LIFE magazine.





Get Out of a Spiritual Rut

I Don't Feel Close to God

Reflect

- *Do you spend time with God every day? If not, what things are keeping you from spending time with God?*
- *The author says, "If what you're doing now isn't working, try something different." What are you doing that isn't working in your spiritual life? What one thing could you try doing that's different?*
- *The author says, "I do think such a disciplined approach will help you recover a devotion time you won't want to miss." Do you agree that a disciplined routine will help you get out of a spiritual rut? Why or why not?*



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How Do You Keep Your Faith Fresh?

8 ideas for a vibrant relationship with Jesus.

At the heart of our faith is Christ. And it's our relationship with him that we must nurture and protect. If you feel like you're stuck, don't just look for more things to do. Consider the ways in which you connect with Christ, and seek new ways to be close to him. Let these suggestions inspire you to look to Christ in a fresh way today.





Get Out of a Spiritual Rut

How Do You Keep Your Faith Fresh?

Look to the Heavens

I enjoy photographing spectacular sunrises and sunsets, which I make into greeting cards for my loved ones. The vibrant yellows and oranges that fade into pastel pinks in the clouds are God's message of love to me. The beauty he creates never fails to lift my spirits and restore my faith.

—Ann Schrag, Kansas

Pass It On

There's no better way to keep your faith fresh than to share it. Going the next step and teaching someone how to become a bold witness and share her faith with others is the most exhilarating of all.

—Shirley Beattie, Florida

Pray Through the Day

I pray short prayers as I go through my day, such as, "Please help me do the right thing"; "Thank you for this blessing"; "Please bless that person in a wheelchair." This keeps me mindful of God and helps me make a positive impact on others.

—Mary Jo Rambino, New York





Get Out of a Spiritual Rut

How Do You Keep Your Faith Fresh?

Say "Yes" to God

I keep growing spiritually by continually saying "yes" to God when he asks me to do something. It could be pausing to pray for someone he brings to mind or agreeing to teach a Bible study. As my pastor once told me, "If I'm not in over my head, I'm not trusting God enough!"

—Zona Wilson, Oregon

Lean on Me

When I feel myself getting in a rut, or when it seems the world is on my shoulders, I turn to one of my prayer warrior friends who holds me accountable. God *wants* us to lean on our friends. Hebrews 10:24 says, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

—Tanisha Whitaker, North Carolina

Find Sanctuary

In our pressure-cooker world, I need to get away and spend extended time with God. Whenever possible, I clear my calendar for three days and go off alone with my Bible, journal, guitar, Christian books, and worship CDs. Whether it's camping at a state park or somewhere else, I love this time to seek God's face and hear his voice.

—Peggy Forstad, Missouri





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How Do You Keep Your Faith Fresh?

Blog It

I write a daily blog, so I have no choice but to keep my faith fresh because my thoughts show up every day in people's in-boxes. I want to show my readers what it's like to live as a Christian mom in the 21st century—how my faith sustains me and helps me keep an eternal perspective. My readers often encourage me with their feedback and insights.

—Heather Ivester, Georgia

Stay in the Word

Daily prayer and Bible study build my relationship with Jesus so it's a constant, living faith, not something I have to "get" in a crisis. God's Word is fresh every day; it encourages, teaches, and inspires me. I'd collapse under the weight of life's trials without a foundation of faith.

—Susan M. Rotella, Rhode Island

This article first appeared in the July/August 2006 edition of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.





Get Out of a Spiritual Rut

How Do You Keep Your Faith Fresh?

Reflect

- *One contributor said, "If I'm not in over my head, I'm not trusting God enough!" Do you think that's true? Why or why not?*
- *Do you have someone who holds you spiritually accountable? If so, is it effective? If not, who could you ask to be your accountability partner?*
- *Have you ever taken a personal spiritual retreat? What did you do? Was it effective? If you were to plan another (or your first) retreat, where would you go? What would you do?*
- *A contributor said, "I pray short prayers as I go through my day." What can you pray for right here, right now?*



Managing a Meandering Mind



How to pray through your distractions.

By Brad Preston

Like the prodigal son, my mind wanders recklessly into a far country when I pray. In moments of solitude when I am just getting close to God, my brain shifts into gear and speeds off for the highway.

I tried making a list.

I tried walking around with my eyes open.

I tried praying out loud; I tried praying real loud.

The harder I tried to eliminate the distractions, the more frustrating they became.



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Managing a Meandering Mind

Then an idea came to me unexpectedly. What if the interruptions are God's effort to dialogue with me in prayer? Perhaps God has a better handle on prayer requests than I do. *What if I allowed him to use the distractions to direct my prayers?*

I decided to surrender my prayer agenda and to stop fighting the interruptions. Instead of battling my wandering mind, I lift up each random thought in prayer when it comes: "Lord, I'm thinking about doughnuts. You got any idea why?" Sometimes praying on it clears the thought away, but other times God uses the thought to speak to me (like convicting me that there's a hole in our relationship).

Besides opening a new world of interactive dialogue with God, my learning to pray the interruptions instead of fighting them, I discovered, has other benefits.

Don't Go There

At times my prayers are interrupted by what appear to be inappropriate subjects—lustful images, anger about the ministry, complaints. My response used to be denial. I didn't want to admit those thoughts could enter the sacred place of prayer. Frustrated, I would push them away. If they came back, I pushed harder. But the pushing became a distraction in itself.

One morning in prayer I was distracted by my irritation with a particular Christian. I was tugged toward bitterness by my ineffective attempts to disciple stubborn believers.





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"Just once, Lord," I prayed, "could you give me someone I didn't have to push so hard?"

God answered, "Why don't you let me take care of it?" God's reply showed that I had been harboring a burden that wasn't mine to carry. Had I ignored the distraction, I would likely have kept carrying it.

Sometimes God uses praying through the thoughts to cleanse them from my mind. Other times I pour out the struggle in all its strife like one of David's psalms. Either way, it has awakened a new honesty and transparency in my relationship with God.

Don't Go There, Either

I like sticking with my prayer list because a list is safe. A list can be used to pray for other people's needs while conveniently overlooking your own shortfalls.

But heeding the interruptions doesn't allow for that careful avoidance. It forces me to address sins, regrets, and shortcomings I normally wouldn't choose to include on my list. Now when my prayers are interrupted with, *You need to devote more time to being intimate with God*, I don't just push the thought away; I stop to pray about it.

If there's guilt tied to the issue I've been sweeping under the rug, praying about it brings forgiveness. And since I'm actually praying about it instead of ignoring it, I'm more likely to make changes in those areas.





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Managing a Meandering Mind

By letting the Lord add his items to the prayer list and by willingly accepting a distraction as an area to explore with him, I'm doing a lot more listening.

The pastor's smooth and eloquent public prayer is much different from the struggles most of us wrestle with in private. But I'm finding relief in an area that used to frustrate me. My prodigal mind is beginning to follow the path home—the path that takes me straight to the Father.

Brad Preston is the pastor of Sawyer Evangelical Church in Bradford, Pennsylvania. This article first appeared in October 2001 on LeadershipJournal.net.

Reflect

- *When you're in a spiritual rut, do you find it hard to pray? Do you ever feel like your prayer life is just a thoughtless ritual? What do you do to try to get out of a prayer rut?*
- *What are the things that distract you when you try to pray?*
- *Have you ever considered praying about those distractions? Do you think it might help your prayer life if you did?*





Just Gotta Have It!

6 ways to help you develop cravings for God's Word.

By Katrina Baker

My kitchen was a mess. I'd dug through every drawer and cupboard, searching for the only thing that would satisfy me...*chocolate!* I was in the middle of a full-blown craving. You know the feeling: that insatiable, overwhelming desire for ice cream, chips, chocolate, or pizza.



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Just Gotta Have It!

Only a few days after I'd torn my kitchen apart in search of chocolate, I came across a Bible verse that drew me up short: "Like newborn babies, *crave* pure spiritual milk" (1 Peter 2:2). The New American Standard Bible puts it this way: "*long* for the...word" (both emphases mine). As I thought about my desire for God's Word, I had to admit "craving" or "longing" didn't define my feelings about my current Bible reading. Yes, I tried to do it daily, but some days, reading God's Word was more mechanical than marvelous, more out of duty than desire.

Looking back over my life, I realized my desire for God's Word had fluctuated between the following degrees:

Having an insatiable appetite. I'd eagerly anticipate reading God's Word daily, and make time for it no matter what else was going on. I couldn't get to sleep at night if I missed it.

Eating my veggies. This is the mode in which I most often found myself. I'd read the Bible because I knew it was right, I wanted to obey God, I knew it was good for me, and I was always glad I did it.

Being force-fed. In this mode, I'd hear God's Word at church and would read the Bible every now and then—but usually not until I felt extremely guilty about my lack of time with him.

Starving. These have been the dry spells, thankfully few, when I've gone weeks without opening my Bible except at church. I've let busyness, distractions, or unconfessed sin get in the way.





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Do you see yourself in the above descriptions? If you're like me, you've experienced each of these stages over the course of your walk with God. But you also wish that you genuinely and consistently craved God's Word.

If my cravings for Scripture were anything like my cravings for chocolate, I would just *have* to have it. I wanted to wake up in the morning and not be able to focus on anything else until I'd spent time in God's Word. I wanted to dig in voraciously, instead of doing a half-hearted devotional.

To discover how to develop a craving for Scripture, I looked back at the high points of my spiritual life—the times when I couldn't get enough of God's Word—and took note of the things I did, the habits I made, and the factors that contributed to the craving. Then I asked other women what helped them develop a craving for God's Word. Here are six things I discovered that can help you rekindle or strengthen your desire for time in Scripture:

I. Remember the Bible's benefits.

After my son's birth, I experienced a prolonged case of "baby blues." Although I found some solace in talking to other moms, journaling, and scheduling "me-time," I found the most significant source of peace and comfort in God's Word. I found particular reassurance in reading the Psalms—seeing how David cried out in fear, confusion, and even despair, but consistently returned to acknowledge God as his refuge and strength.





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At other times, I've turned to Scripture to find direction, wisdom, and encouragement. The Bible holds all this for us, and much more! Scripture tells us God's Word is "a lamp to [our] feet and a light for [our] path" (Psalm 119:105). Psalm 111:10 also reminds us "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding."

Just as satisfying physical craving releases feel-good chemicals in our brains, satisfying a hunger for Scripture releases all kinds of spiritual benefits and blessings in our lives, such as increased wisdom, comfort, and peace.

2. Ask God to give you desire for his Word.

What better way to obtain a desire for God's Word than from God himself? Each day, ask God to give you a deep-rooted desire to spend time reading and studying the Bible. Then be alert for those inner promptings and reminders to open his Word and dive in. I find that when I consistently ask God to give me a desire to spend time with him, he always comes through. I can't walk past the shelf where I keep my Bible and devotional book without feeling as though I should pull it out and dig in!

3. Make daily Bible reading instinctual.

Experts say it takes 21 days to develop a habit. I've applied this principle to exercise, drinking water, and even making my bed—so why not use it with Bible reading? Decide on a reading or study plan and commit yourself to spending time in God's Word *every* day, whether you feel like it or not. One thing that helps me is to use a daily devotional aid. After following that plan for a few weeks, I find I can't skip a day in God's Word without feeling like I'm missing out on something.





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4. Keep a spiritual journal.

One of the best ways to strengthen and maintain a desire for God's Word is to keep a record of how Scripture has impacted your life. I kept journals throughout my college years. Looking back over them reminds me of how God has worked in my life and gives me the motivation to continue serious Bible study. Your journal doesn't have to be a special leather-bound volume; it can be a spiral notebook, or simply notes taken directly in your Bible. The point is to take note of how various Scripture passages have touched your heart, motivated change in your life, or given you insight into life's circumstances. When you've filled up a journal, notebook, or Bible, keep it as a record and reminder—one you can turn to time and time again to see how powerful God's Word truly is.

5. Customize your Bible study to fit your personality.

For years I struggled with the inability to follow a "read through the Bible in a year" program. I've known friends and family members who have done this year after year, and I always felt I should be able to do this, too. But I always gave up by March. Finally, I realized the Bible-in-a-year plan just didn't fit my personality. As a detail-oriented person, when I try to absorb four or five chapters of the Bible each day, I feel as though I'm going too fast. I get frustrated and give up. Now I tailor my study to my personality—more in-depth studies and careful reading of shorter passages.

My friend Kathy also has found that customizing her Bible reading to fit her personality has led to more productive, effective, and consistent times in God's Word. "One of the most important things for me is variety," she





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says. "If I find my devotional time getting stale, I try to change it. Also, I occasionally set aside large chunks of time to really 'dig into' the Word by doing in-depth study that can't be completed in short bites of time."

6. Customize your Bible study to fit your circumstances.

Just as we all have different personalities that may require different approaches to reading the Bible, we all go through different life stages that demand a change in our Bible reading. A mother of three preschoolers might not be able to devote the same amount of time and energy to reading God's Word as she will when all her children are in school. Lori, a wife and mom from Nebraska, has been able to customize her time in the Bible throughout her adult life to fit whatever circumstances she finds herself in. During college, she carved out enough time to read through the Bible twice. In the early years of her marriage, while working full-time as a teacher, she fit in shorter reading times whenever she had the opportunity, such as reading some Scripture while stopped at traffic lights during her long commute. Now as a busy stay-at-home-mom, she does most of her Bible study late at night or when her children are in the tub.

Take a look at your roles and responsibilities. Make sure you're not trying to do too much (and definitely not too little!) for your circumstances. Finding the method of study and reading that works for where you are right now will keep you from giving up in frustration.





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I know there still will be times when I don't "feel" the craving for Scripture I want to have. But I also know the important thing is for each of us to be aware of our desire for God's Word and always to be working to increase it.

And another benefit is—satisfying our craving for Scripture will never make us fat! Now...where did I hide that chocolate?

Katrina Baker, a freelance writer, lives with her family in Pennsylvania. This article first appeared in the July/August 2004 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *What's one thing you absolutely crave? Does your desire for God's Word match your desire for that thing?*
- *Which of the author's four degrees can you relate to right now? Which of her six suggestions do you think will best help you move up on the "thermometer"?*
- *Have you ever considered customizing your Bible study to fit you? Are there some methods that frustrate you and inevitably pull you into a spiritual rut? What can you do to change your Bible study methods to fit your personality and circumstances?*



Bored with the Lord?

How you can overcome
boredom in your spiritual life.

By Frederica Mathewes-Green



How can a person deal with boredom and laziness in their spiritual and personal life? Start with putting down this article this instant and go read your Bible!



Get Out of a Spiritual Rut

Bored with the Lord?

Okay, that's one way to deal with laziness—have another person badger you. But it's not effective long-term, at least not once you move out of your mother's house. It's better to have the motivation inside. Many of us find that we have plenty of spiritual motivation at the beginning of our walk, or at various times when we feel inspired or moved, but other times we just run out of steam. We fluctuate in our feelings for God—what the senior devil in C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* termed "the law of undulation."

I saw a cartoon years ago that showed a husband driving an old car while his wife sat on the passenger side. The wife was complaining: "You know, we used to be more romantic. When we were out driving, we used to cuddle up and sit close together. Why don't we do that anymore?" The husband replied, "Well, I haven't moved."

God hasn't moved. He never moves. But we do. We forget him, drift away, get distracted, and then have to round ourselves up and come back. It might be said that the whole secret of the Christian life is paying attention: keeping our eyes fixed on the Lord, putting first his kingdom, and listening for his direction, moment by moment, in all we do. If we had that right, everything else would follow. But it's hard to keep focusing on him, with such a busy, enticing, and frightening world around us. Ask Peter, who could walk on water only as long as he kept his eyes on





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Bored with the Lord?

Jesus. Instead of attending to God constantly in our hearts, as Paul advised ("Pray constantly," 1 Thess. 5:17), we pile up self-improvement projects. And that's what we get bored with—not the Lord himself.

Frederica Mathewes-Green is the author of The Illumined Heart (Paraclete Press). This article first appeared in the March/April 2004 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN.

Reflect

- *Do you agree with the author that we don't get bored with God, but instead we get bored with self-improvement projects? Why or why not?*
- *The author implies that if you're not close to God, it's not because he has moved. Have you moved away from God? What has caused you to move? What is one thing you can do today to move back toward God?*



Still a Bit Jewish



Some Jewish traditions that can enrich your spiritual life.

Interview by Dick Staub

*Lauren Winner is on a wonderful spiritual journey and is kind enough to write about it for others to go along for the ride. In *Girl Meets God* she navigated readers through her sojourn from Judaism to Christianity. And in her newest book, *Mudhouse Sabbath*, she discusses the Jewish traditions she misses.*

What have you found useful as you start re-thinking the Sabbath as a Christian?

I've reflected on what I understand are the two overarching themes of Sabbath law in Judaism. One of those is the general command not to work on the Sabbath, and the other is the general command to be joyful. So I tried to reflect, in both my family and community, on ways that I could undertake both of those two over-arching principles.



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Still a Bit Jewish

One way is that I've stopped shopping. That was something I only discerned to be not very in keeping with the spirit of the Sabbath and resting, not interfering with creation. One of the other things I have found helpful is that I try not to check my email or use my cell phone on the Sabbath, which sounds like a small thing. But those are implements that connect us to our work and they put me in this state of very low-grade, constant tension that someone is trying to get a hold of me. So I simply try not to check email or use my cell phone on Sabbath.

Now obviously, there are exceptions to all of these rules. My mother was quite ill last fall, and if there was a Sunday and she needed me to go to the grocery store and purchase some Ensure for her, obviously I'm not going to respond to that by saying, "I'm sorry, it's the Sabbath."

You say, "Churches don't grieve well often because of a lack of ritual. And if there's a place where there is a discipline to mourning, it's in Judaism, which marks the days." Talk about how Judaism "marks the days" as part of the mourning process.

The first period that is demarcated in the Jewish community would be the seven days, or the week after someone dies. That is a time when the mourner is not expected to do anything else but be grief stricken. People come to your home and provide all of your meals. The second period is the period of the following month, which is a time when the mourner gradually edges back into his or her normal day-to-day rhythms, but there





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are still actually a lot of restrictions on what the mourner can do. And then the rest of the year of mourning, the mourner is required to say a prayer every day, and it is a prayer that can only be said with a quorum of ten other Jews gathered for prayer. But it doesn't say anything about mourning. It is entirely a prayer that praises God. It begins, "Magnified and sanctified may his great name be," and goes on from there as a hymn of praise.

I think all of us who have mourned know that sometimes we don't feel like praising God in the middle of our grief. So the Jewish mourner is required to do it even though he may not feel like it and to do it in his community even though he may feel like staying in bed. I think what is so insightful about the Jewish tradition of mourning is the recognition that mourning takes a long time.

Talk a bit about what you're learning in the area of prayer as it relates to your Jewish tradition.

I was schooled in liturgical prayer, as a Jew, and then have spent my entire Christian life in liturgical communities. The concern, I think, that people have about liturgy, or the fear that people have is that it gets boring and rote. And I'll be the first to admit that sometimes it does. I can sit down with my prayer book to say my morning office or my set of morning prayers, and I can realize 10 or 15 minutes into that that I've been mouthing the words but thinking about my grocery list or something.





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So the danger of liturgical prayer is that it does become habitual and can become rote. But I find that when I don't have to think all the time about what words I'm going to say next, then I am free to enter into reverencing God in prayer. The other great gift of liturgy is that if you have a set of liturgical prayers, your prayer life is not going to be subject to your own emotional whims.

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Reflect

- *In what ways can honoring the Sabbath affect your spiritual life?*
- *Do you think the opportunity to follow the Jewish mourning ritual would help you during a time of loss? Why or why not? Are there any ways in which you could feasibly follow the Jewish tradition?*
- *What is your opinion on the effectiveness of liturgical prayer? Do you think it could help get you out of a spiritual rut? In what ways?*





Doing Life Together

Spiritual growth and emotional support may be as near as your neighborhood.

By Jane Johnson Struck

It was September 1999, and Beth Shadid, then 39, had recently given birth to her fifth baby, Caleb, after losing both her fourth child, Micah, at birth, and her brother, Jim, to lung cancer in 1998.

"The past year had been extremely hard for our family, with two deaths back to back," says Beth, who has three other sons now ages eight and under. "So when fall came, we were celebrating Caleb, our surprise gift of new life."





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Throughout those difficult times, Beth had grown close to her neighbor Dina, a mom of three. "Dina attended both our son's funeral and my brother's memorial service," Beth says. "She was so kind and sympathetic. Our friendship really deepened, and I felt comfortable opening up to her a bit about my faith in Christ. She'd seen the strength I'd drawn from it."

Dina, who'd never attended a Bible study before, knew Beth had been involved in various women's Bible studies throughout the five years they'd lived across the street from each other. So Dina asked Beth if she was planning to join a women's Bible study that fall. "I didn't think I could possibly pack up my newborn, plus my three other active little boys, and attend a weekly study," Beth admits. "I recommended a women's Bible study at a local church in case Dina was interested in attending one on her own. Then I said, 'But I'd *love* it if someone got something started in our neighborhood!'"

Surprisingly, that "someone who got something started in the neighborhood" turned out to be busy mom Beth—with the able assistance of Dina. Right off the bat, Dina was so excited about the idea of bonding with other women in the neighborhood that she suggested she and Beth start their own group. Before long, Beth, who'd never envisioned herself a facilitator of a neighborhood group with her busy, growing family, became exactly that. "I'm not a teacher or leader," she admits. "I've been in church a long time and have a strong faith, and I love the idea of being able to share that with others. Yet I don't see myself as articulate, so I wouldn't naturally put myself in this position. But there's something about having come out of pain, as I had,





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that makes you say even more, 'Okay, God, if this is what you want me to do, there's nothing more important in life than being available to you.' As I prayed about starting a group, it felt like the right thing to do."

So Beth and Dina brainstormed ways to make a group convenient both for them and the other neighbors they hoped might join. "We decided we'd take turns meeting at each other's home every other week. We thought we could at least handle *that*," explains Beth. "We also decided to be casual about the whole thing and let moms bring their kids. I volunteered to check out hiring babysitters from a local Christian college so we could keep the kids in a play area in the same house."

But there was also the question of study materials. Realizing some of her neighbors, such as Dina, may never have studied the Bible before, Beth asked a few mature, trusted Christian women what might constitute an appropriate study to kick off the fledgling group. One suggestion that struck a chord: a workbook called *Living in Jesus' Name*, one in a series of study guides from well-known author John Ortberg.

"Basically Dina and I decided, 'Let's ask some neighbors if they'd like to get together and have coffee.' We'll tell them, 'Here's a book idea. What do you think?'" says Beth. Then Dina and Beth called around the neighborhood to see who might be interested in participating. Four—including a couple committed Christians—responded positively.





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"Everybody was easygoing about what to study," Beth says, "so when the six of us met for the first time that October, we started working through Ortberg's study book, which clearly walks you through what it means to be a Christian. It's filled with lots of practical teaching and spiritual exercises."

A little more than two years since its launch, the group's still going strong. In fact, that initial circle of 6 has grown through word of mouth to 18 members, with 12 regular attendees. "We'll have someone come who's been absent several weeks, and she'll say, 'I've missed this *so much!*'" says Lisa Barry, a fellow believer and one of the charter members who frequently opens her home to the group.

What do the women do when they get together every other Friday morning from 9:30 to 11:15 A.M.? "We chit-chat for the first 30 minutes," says Beth. "Then we sit down, open our lesson, and talk about whatever jumped out at us that week. Sometimes I don't have the time to prepare for the lesson beforehand as I'd like. That's when I throw my hands up and say, 'Okay, God, this has to be from you. It can't be from me, because I don't feel ready.'"

While group members bring their Bibles to the meetings and talk about spiritual topics (currently they're working through another workbook entitled *Gifted to Serve*, which discusses spiritual gifts), Beth and the other core members work hard to ensure no one feels uncomfortable or offended during the meetings, since the women attending vary in their level of interest in matters of faith. The first year, says Beth, they didn't even pray together. "Just this last year, we've started closing in prayer, and usually Lisa Barry does that for us," explains Beth.





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The group's slowly evolved into part Bible study, part book club, part cross-cultural awareness, part old-fashioned support group for the women who attend. During the summers, which pose a challenge to regular attendance because of kids' schedules and family vacations, the group opts to read condensed versions of classics such as *Les Miserables* or *Cry, The Beloved Country* instead of Bible-related materials. Beth, who has a heart for cross-cultural ministry, occasionally invites some of the women she encounters through other international organizations to speak at meetings. Last year, Beth, Dina, Lisa, and the others helped a Sudanese refugee and her two daughters adjust to their new life in the United States by assembling and delivering a "Welcome Pack" of basic household necessities—sheets, towels, plates, canned goods, and personal care items. And last December, Beth and the group organized a holiday gathering that included husbands—a first!—to help two orphaned Sudanese boys celebrate their first Christmas in America.

"This group meets many different needs," says Beth. "On one level, I sincerely believe we all want to learn more about the Bible, to explore what life is really about. But it's also about women doing life together in a safe environment. Just getting together as women helps you realize you're not alone in your situation, that we all have struggles with disciplining our kids or challenges in our marriage. It's wonderful to be able to share not only the pain in life, but the great joys as well. It's just such a fun group of unique women! Our sense of community has been one of its biggest blessings.





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"When my husband, Hythem, and I learned at 22 weeks that our baby Micah wouldn't survive after birth, we didn't know how to pray. So we simply said, 'God, do something great through this.' As we prayed that prayer, we sensed 'something great' could be others coming to know Christ through our experience.

"While I don't know if this group's a direct answer to that prayer, I've had many opportunities to share my faith, to let others know how great God is," adds Beth. "As we've grown together, I've seen other women become more open about how God's revealing himself to them. I know that for Dina and a few others in our group, their faith has become personal over the past two years. And I've been encouraged to walk with God daily, to keep looking for his presence in my life every step of the way. There's this exciting sense of God at work—all I did was jump aboard!"

How to Start a Group ... Even if You Think You Can't!

1. Don't sell yourself short. As a busy mom of four boys who didn't feel she had the necessary leadership skills, Beth had every excuse to nix the idea of helping start a neighborhood group. But she's glad she responded to God's nudging. So if you feel this is something God wants you to try, go for it—and watch yourself grow!

2. The power of two. Do you know a neighbor who also may be yearning for a group? While you can go solo, Beth suggests finding a like-minded friend with whom to join forces. Partner together. And don't forget to pray!





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3. Size it up. What works best for your schedules? Once a week meetings? Every other week? Babysitting provided? Figure out the needs of your potential group, then try to meet them. For example, if most women interested in attending your group are moms of small children, arrange for babysitting—that will make it easier for them to show up! Remember, keep it casual.

4. Banish your inner Martha Stewart. "Every woman likes her place to look nice," admits Beth, "but I think I've set the example there." Meaning: Beth doesn't sweat not having a sparkling home when it's her turn to host a meeting. "My home's a little messy, but come on in anyway," she says.

And what about serving fancy goodies to your crowd? "Usually someone volunteers to bring something, but we try not to worry about that!" says Beth. All you really need to do is perk a mean cup of coffee, and you're in business.

5. Have a plan. Beth's flexible about how she leads the group; when an interesting opportunity crops up, such as hearing the life story of a visitor from another country, she'll seize it and deviate from the group's planned study. But make sure you have some kind of study material that's grounded in the Bible. If you don't have a clue how to start, ask a trusted Christian friend, your pastor, or your local Christian bookstore owner.

6. Be real. Life isn't always easy, happy, or tidy. Christians cry, hurt, and get lonely, just like everyone else. So don't be afraid to show your real face to your friends, when appropriate. It's the key to helping others show theirs, too.





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7. Make it a no-pressure zone. Do your friends feel uncomfortable praying out loud? Then don't make them. Does a member have trouble keeping up with the lessons? Don't make it an issue. Your goal isn't to be rigid, but to build relationships that point women to a loving God.

Building Deep Connections

Looking for a group that requires a higher commitment but builds deeper friendships? Then a "12 Women" group might fit the bill. Based on the biblical model of Jesus' selection of 12 disciples, Barbara Jenkins, co-author of *The New York Times* best-seller *The Walk West*, birthed the concept in 1997 during a time of personal turmoil.

"My husband had walked out on our family, and one of my children was caught up in alcohol and drugs. My world had turned upside down," Barbara explains. She sensed a need for something beyond what her Christian counselor, church, and close friends were providing. "I saw in the Bible how Jesus changed the world with 12 disciples. I realized I could benefit from having a trusted circle of 11 other friends to help me carry these burdens."

Barbara wrestled with the idea of this biblically based group for six months. "Finally, I reached the point of saying, 'God, if this is of you, I'll do it. If not, just leave me alone,'" she says. When she shared the idea with a few women, they recommended others who were searching for such a connection. Before long, a diverse mix of 11 women had accepted Barbara's invitation to participate.





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"I told them that if they were looking for deeper friendships, then '12 Women' was for them," says Barbara. "I laid out the guidelines: We were to be grounded in biblical truth; we'd commit to meet once a week nine months out of the year; we'd agree to be there for each other through thick and thin. And every week a different woman would be the facilitator."

Each "12 Women" meeting begins with a devotional, followed by a discussion time, then prayer. "We've had lively discussions about everything from money management to the Ten Commandments," explains Barbara. "It's not a gossip session," she adds. "It's a place where we see God working in our lives. Because of the level of commitment in our group, women lower their guard and become real. If someone moves or has to leave, they're not replaced until the next 'session' begins. Only God could create this family of sisters that's lasted so long!"

Today Barbara's initial group now meets quarterly. But other "12 Women" groups are springing up around the country or have been spearheaded by original group members. And Barbara and two women from the pilot group recently completed a training session in Brooklyn, New York, for "12 Women" groups. Barbara's also created the 12 Women Foundation and a guidebook, *12 Women, Sisters for Your Journey*, to help others form their own group.





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"My '12 Women' group has helped me become more honest about who I am," says Barbara. "Women have a hunger for connection, for seeing God at work in their lives. That's exactly what a '12 Women' group provides."

For more information on "12 Women" groups, e-mail Barbara at bjpjenkins@aol.com, or phone her at 615-781-4965. This article first appeared in the March/April 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *How does community influence our spiritual lives? What impact has a small group or community of friends had on your spiritual life?*
- *How has a women's group or a circle of friends encouraged your spiritual growth in the past? How has a small group encouraged you when you were in a spiritually dry place?*
- *How might God use you to start a small group for spiritual growth and encouragement? What would be your biggest obstacle to starting or joining a group? How can you overcome this obstacle?*



Additional Resources



A Place Called There: Where Contentment and Desire Meet by Kingsley Fletcher (*Destiny Image*, 2003; 192 pages). Many of us are stuck in a spiritual rut—feeling that the joy and power of our Christianity is just not there any more. This book will launch you into an exciting new adventure to the place in the Spirit where you will experience the powerful, life-renewing depths of God.

Forever Changed by Mac McConnell (*Winepress*, 2006; 128 pages). When there's no change, there's no life, and that's a waste. Yes, the rut gets comfortable—sometimes too comfortable. McConnell invites you to climb up, just high enough for a better view, for an intriguing journey in Jericho.



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Additional Resources

Get Out of That Pit: Straight Talk about God's Deliverance from a Former Pit-Dweller by Beth Moore (*Thomas Nelson*, 2006; 224 pages). Beth Moore wants readers to know if God could lift her out of the pit, he can get ANYONE out! The permanent lessons she learned in her desperation—shared in this very personal book—are lessons of hope for all of us. While she deeply empathizes with the hows and whys of life in the "pit," she continually points readers to the deliverance that awaits.

Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul's Path to God by Gary Thomas (*Zondervan*, 2002; 232 pages). Has your Christian walk become a spiritual rut? Maybe it's because you're trying to follow somebody else's path. Describing nine different temperaments, Thomas helps you more naturally express your relationship with God and follow the route he has designed you to travel.

Experiencing Spiritual Breakthroughs by Bruce Wilkinson (*Multnomah*, 2002; 256 pages). Many books explain how an individual can break out of a spiritual rut—but this one helps whole families experience rejuvenation.

Hold Nothing Back!: How Sacrificial Obedience Leads to Intimacy with God by Alicia Williamson (*New Hope*, 2002; 208 pages). Sacrificial obedience to God's unchanging commands leads to intimacy with him, brings you further in your calling, and jars you out of ruts and complacency, according to writer, recording artist, worship leader, and television host Alicia Williamson.



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