

A LIFE WITH MARGIN

A 25-Day Devotional

Westover Church

Margin is “the space between our load and our limits.”¹

This devotional guide is designed to serve as a daily companion as part of Westover’s 5-week emphasis on *Margin*. There are 5 daily devotional readings for each of the 5 weeks, with 2-days built in for margin along the way, just in case you miss a day.

WEEK ONE:	<i>A Life of Margin</i>
WEEK TWO:	<i>Margin for God's Word</i>
WEEK THREE:	<i>Margin for Prayer</i>
WEEK FOUR:	<i>Margin for Generosity</i>
WEEK FIVE:	<i>Margin for Missional Living</i>

A variety of staff and leadership have contributed to this 25-day devotional guide, sharing their hearts, perspectives, experiences, and even their struggles, as it relates to living with God-glorifying margin in our lives. May you be encouraged and challenged throughout this journey. And may you experience the joy and freedom that comes from increasing margin for God in your life – the God who has made room for us –in the days to come!

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¹ Richard Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, p.69.

He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me.

Psalm 18:19 *ESV*

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week one:

A Life of Margin

DAY ONE: Freely & Lightly

“Jesus declared...Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:25, 28-30 ESV

Ask a sampling of people, *how are you doing?* It’s likely you’ll hear things like *busy, tired*; maybe even *exhausted, overwhelmed, stressed-out*. This can be especially true among those living in a western, American context. Although capacities and definitions differ from person to person, it isn’t uncommon for many of our lives to be characterized by *busyness*, reflected in full calendars and schedules, lengthy to-do lists, un-responded-to voicemails and text messages, unread and unchecked emails; and the list goes on!

To be clear there is nothing necessarily wrong with being busy at certain times, busy with certain things, and busy during certain seasons of life. In fact, 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 warns against idleness and laziness. However, what’s detrimental to your soul is a life of *constant busyness*, finding yourself rushing from one thing to the other, struggling to keep your head above water, just trying to get through the day, all with little to no breathing room or margin in your life.

Margin can be defined as “the space between our load and our limits.”²

The words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30 offer a welcome invitation, a countercultural remedy, and much-needed relief amidst the chronic and soul-damaging busyness of life. As you will see in the days to come, you were created to live with margin. You need margin. You have limits. And that’s ultimately a good thing, because it’s our limitations and our loads that keep us dependent on God – a God who invites us to bring the heaviness of our loads to Him in exchange for the rest, *His rest*, that our souls desperately need. And as a yoke was intended to ease the discomfort of carrying a heavy load, Jesus invites us to exchange our heavy loads by taking on *His yoke*, one that is easy, one that lightens our loads.

While it may seem that you can’t afford to have margin in your life, Jesus says, *You can’t afford not to!* Perhaps you’re reading through this hurriedly because of the limited margin in your life. Jesus says, *Come to me*. Come to Him right now. Cast your cares and your heavy load upon Him, for He cares for you. Fall into His arms. Jesus says, *learn from me*. Ask Him to teach you how to live with margin, where the space between your load and your limits may increase and where you can find the rest your soul needs and was created for in Him.

² Richard Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial, and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives*, p.69.

DAY TWO: Reaping to the Edges

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.”

Leviticus 19-9-10 ESV

Gleaning is the practice of gathering and collecting grain or crops that are left-behind by harvesters. Built into Israel’s economic and legal system were gleaning laws, or gleaning rights, which were meant to provide for the impoverished, those who were without the normal security from a family, and those who were without land of their own. Gleaning laws prohibited the owner from harvesting the edges and corners of their own fields, as well as stripping bare their own vineyards and orchards. Deuteronomy 24:19-21 adds that the harvester is not to go back a second time to harvest whatever is left. The more generous the owner, the more valuable the gleanings.

Not only were these gleaning laws God’s means of caring for the poor through his people, they were also meant to show the people how to live with margin, how to have space between their loads and their limits. **Gleaning laws were to teach the people not to take everything to the limit**, while also taking proper responsibility for the things that God had entrusted to them and using them to take responsibility for the impoverished, the fatherless, the widow, and the foreigners among them.

A biblical view of margin not only brings us in alignment with the things of God’s heart and how we use our resources; biblical margin also keeps us from living right up to the edges, guarding us from taking everything to the limit. Without margin, you work yourself to exhaustion. Without margin, you labor to get to a place of rest, oftentimes without ever getting enough. Without margin, you mistakenly fall into thinking *it’s all mine, I can do with it what I want!* Without margin, you forget that it is God who ultimately provides, *not me*. Without margin, you have *no time*, where space for God, for others is dangerously limited, and whatever time there is becomes leftovers at best.

However, with margin, you go from strength to strength (Psalm 84:7). With margin, you work *from* rest instead of always *to* it, because you understand that rest isn’t a *place*, it’s a *Person!* (see Day 1) With margin, you are better positioned to be generous with the resources of your time, talent, and treasures. With margin, we not only make space for God, we see God in every space of our lives. With margin, God gets our best.

Where are you living dangerously to the edges? Where are you taking things to their limit, and in the process, limiting the One your soul needs most? Confess those things to God, who is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse us, and ask Him to show you where and how to find margin in your life, not only for your own good, but for the good of others and for His glory!

DAY THREE: Number Your Days

“So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

Psalm 90:12 ESV

Psalm 90 is the oldest of the 150 Psalms. It was written by Moses, who lived to be 120 years old, and was likely written later in his life, which means Moses would have had some unique perspective on *time*. Given the events of Moses’s life, which included being raised in the house of a king for the first 40 years, fleeing to the wilderness for the next 40 years after being found-out for murdering someone, and spending his final 40 years leading the Hebrews out of bondage and to the doorstep of The Promised Land, Moses had seen much.

In Numbers 12:3, Moses is described as “a very humble man, more humble than anyone on the face of the earth” (NIV). Not only had he witnessed God in miraculous ways, spoken with God face-to-face, and had seen firsthand the goodness of God – things of which he could most certainly have boasted – it was God’s glory and not his own that Moses was most concerned.

Despite God prohibiting him from going into The Promised Land himself, what Moses understood better than anyone was how it is always better to be in the wilderness *with* God than in The Promised Land *without* Him. It was Moses who had glimpsed what God was building through this people He had called out and redeemed, and who understood his place in redemptive history. And it was Moses who *humbly* understood himself, the people, and the nations, through his proximity to the heart of God.

It's with this perspective, posture, and humility of heart that Moses asks God, on behalf of himself and God’s people, to *teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom*.

Perhaps another way of understanding what Moses is asking is this: ***God, teach us to count our days so that our days might count!*** Isn’t this what we want? We want our days to count. But for that to happen, we must seek godly wisdom that results in a life that is humbly postured before the God who has numbered our days (see Job 14:5).

In the Greek language, there are two commonly used words for time. *Chronos* refers to quantity of time; clock time that is measured by seconds, minutes, hours. *Kairos* refers to quality of time; time that is measured not by minutes but by moments. God is eternal, unbound by time, and sovereign over time, holding time itself in His hands. And while God knows the *Chronos* or quantity of our time, a *Kairos* perspective of time allows us to see the preciousness of time through God’s perspective, where we make the most of our limited *Chronos* time here on earth.

We’ll come back to Psalm 90 next week. In the meantime, ask yourself: *Is my life being lived minute-by-minute, or moment-by-moment? Instead of asking God for more time, where do I need God’s wisdom to bring quality to the time I’ve already been given?* Margin allows us to live wisely, poising our counted days on this earth to ultimately count for eternity!

DAY FOUR: Wide Open Spaces

*"He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me...
You gave a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip."*

Psalm 18:19, 36 *ESV*

[Take a moment to also read Genesis 26:12-22.]

In Genesis 12, the biblical account narrows-in on a man named Abram and his descendants, whom God blesses, and through whom all the families and nations of the earth will be blessed. By Genesis 26, the blessing has passed from Abram, now Abraham, to Isaac, the *son of promise*, who is born to he and his wife, Sarah, in their old age. A famine has driven Isaac and his family to an open, rugged, sparsely populated area southwest of the Dead Sea, called Gerar. It was part of the land of the Philistines at the time, ruled by a man named Abimelech. While in the land, Isaac thrived, and the people around him envied his success, which was part of the evidence of God's blessing upon him. As a result, they forced him out.

Isaac departed from there and settled in a nearby valley where his father had once dug wells. Wells were an important commodity, especially in a region so arid and rocky. Wells not only served personal and agricultural needs but also the needs of an entire community. So, as Isaac settles into his new home, he and his servants began re-digging the wells of his father, which had been stopped-up after the death of Abraham (v.15,18).

The first well that they dug became contested by the local herdsmen, who claimed that the well, along with its water, was theirs. Despite the work of re-digging the well, Isaac just concedes the dispute, naming the well Esek, which in Hebrew translates *contention* or *dispute*; commemorating the contention that had taken place over the well. So Isaac moves on and keeps digging.

The second well produces the same results: a good well, but more quarreling. So Isaac calls this one Sitnah, which means *strife, accusation, enmity* or *hatred*. Again, Isaac concedes the well, moves on, and keeps digging. And after re-digging a third well, there is no quarreling. So Isaac appropriately names this one "*Rehoboth*," meaning *enlargement, wide, broad, open space*, "*For now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land*" (v.22). Rehoboth represented room made by the LORD for Isaac to make a home, spread out, and live into his future, which includes being a blessing to the world.

Where do you find yourself longing for a *Rehoboth* in your life? Where do you need room? Room to *be*, room to *breathe*, room *be still*, room to *listen*? Where is God showing you to keep digging? Where is He calling you to put down your shovel? Psalm 18:19 tells us that God has rescued us because He delights in us. He has made room for us. The invitation is open. Make room for *Him*. Delight in Him. Abide in Him. And as you do, you will bear even greater fruit, fruit that will last (John 15:5,16).

DAY FIVE: The First Day

“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So, God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”

Genesis 1:31—2:3 ESV

“And [Jesus] said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Mark 2:27-28 ESV

Genesis 1 is the origin account of all creation. Throughout this poetic opening chapter, we see a repeated refrain at the end of each of the first six days of creation: *there was evening and there was morning*. NOT morning and evening, which is the ordering of a day that most people are accustomed. Jewish rabbi's have taught how this *evening and...morning* order is incredibly purposeful in showing how the day was meant to begin – with rest, not with work. In Jewish tradition, Sabbath began at sundown (evening), and in some traditions, the moment when at least three stars in the sky were visible. (Of course, this wouldn't help you on a cloudy evening!)

The *evening and...morning* refrain meant that your day began when the first thing you would typically do was go to bed (except maybe for second- and third-shifters, and night-owls). In other words, the first thing you did to start your day was to rest. The day didn't begin with waking-up, scrambling to pick-out clothes, grabbing a quick breakfast, getting the kids off to school, and rushing out the door. The day didn't begin with work and production. The day began with rest. This was to teach you that your identity lies in who God created you to be, NOT in what you do.

As impossible as it would be to bring culture into flipping the paradigm for when a day begins and ends, the *evening and...morning* refrain demonstrates how things work in God's economy.

In Genesis 1:26-28, on the sixth day, God created human beings, male and female, in His own image and likeness. Then, in Genesis 2, after God had finished His creational work, we read (v.3) that *God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all his work that he had done in creation*. (This takes on even deeper meaning when you consider that the 7th day, the Sabbath, was humanity's first full day. It all begins with rest!) This becomes the enduring model for the *Sabbath*, something God explicitly commands the people to observe in the fourth of the 10 Commandments. Sabbath was not simply a command, it was a gift, a provision, a merciful way of forcing people down who only seem to know work, busyness, hurry, noise.

If you want to understand margin, it is imperative to know Sabbath. Jesus makes clear, it was not mankind that was made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for mankind. It's not something legalistic. It's not restricted to one particular day. It's a time for me to pause, to rest, to reflect, to restore, to remember that it is God who makes the world go round, not me. Sabbath can be observed in a day; it can be experienced in moments, but the *rest* promised in Sabbath is always found in the Person of Jesus! Come to Him. Find your rest in Him. Work from *His* rest, not to it!

week two:

Margin for God's Word

DAY SIX: Sitting at Jesus' Feet

"As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he taught. But Martha was distracted by the big dinner she was preparing. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me."

But the Lord said to her, "My dear Martha, you are worried and upset over all these details! There is only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:38-42 NLT

Twenty-four hours. That's all the time we have in each given day. Yet, just this week, I caught myself saying, "I wish there were more hours in the day" as I tried to check-off my seemingly endless to-do list. Have you ever been there? The demands and to-do lists in life can often feel overwhelming in the fast-paced culture we live in. Our schedules are packed full, often with lots of "good" things, and we can find it hard to say "no" to just one more thing to our calendars. As a result, we often resort to multi-tasking, which ultimately leaves us unable to give our full attention to anyone or anything. And this, I believe, is one of Satan's best tactics...busyness and distraction. The last thing he desires and wants for us is to spend time alone with God, to be nourished and refreshed by His Word and truth daily, because He knows there is power in God's Word.

In fact, when it comes to margin and the importance of prioritizing time with God, I can't help but think of the story of Mary and Martha, when Jesus came to visit them in their home. They each ultimately had a choice to make in how to spend their time. Take these next few minutes to read this passage again, slowly, and think through the questions below.

Who do you relate to more in this story...Mary or Martha? Why?

Is there any blank space on your calendar? Do you have room to breathe? To think? To rest? To just be and enjoy life?

How can you create margin in your daily schedule to simply sit at the feet of Jesus and spend time in His Word?

Pray. Ask God to show you what you may need to say no to or things you may need to cut out, so that you have room to breathe and to spend time alone with Him.

Anna Lilly, Senior Director of Middle School Ministry

DAY SEVEN: Blessed Limitations

*"Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!"
For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night.
You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning:
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers....
... So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.*

Psalm 90:1-6, 12 ESV

It's safe to say many of us live with little to no margin in life. From sleep deprivation and poor food choices to anxiously attending to every family, work, and church urgency that comes our way, our behavior seems to declare, "I'm unstoppable, ever-successful, unlimited."

However, our own human nature warns that we need margin. An adult human can last roughly three weeks without food, 3-4 days without water, a few minutes without oxygen. Relative to other creatures, the human baby is extremely dependent at birth for survival. One article emphasizes our limitations by comparison, saying "Foals are on their feet not long after being born. Chicks break through their shells and within hours are pecking around for food. Snakes hatch and just slither away. Humans, on the other hand, are completely helpless at birth and remain dependent on their parents for many years." ³ It's almost as if God purposefully made humankind very dependent.

However, being created in the image of God, the Creator has "put eternity into man's heart" (Eccl. 3:11). We are driven to enjoy life, serve in love, pursue justice; *yet*, we are utterly dependent beings. Do you see the dilemma? We're made in need our boundaries, but with a boundless spirit! In this tension we turn for wisdom in God's Word.

Moses writes "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). Wisdom comes with a condition: Acknowledge you are limited; You are dependent; You need guard rails, guidelines, boundaries. You can't do it all. You need margin. It was no accident that God created us to need margin. After creating Adam and Eve, these fleshy spiritual beings, he declared his creation "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Without margin we declare that we are self-sufficient; we are ruler over our life and purpose to bring about our own salvation and glory. In love, God stiff-arms our pride-filled manifesto, declaring, "You have a set number of days, listen to me. Don't waste a single day, I can help you. Come to me, you who are exhausted, I will bring about what your deepest longings seek, I will give you rest."

Michael Carter, Pastor of Creative Arts

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna3076700>

DAY EIGHT: Seek His Face

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you," says the Lord...

Jeremiah 29:11-14a NLT

If you've grown up in the church, you're probably familiar with Jeremiah 29:11. Sometimes people will use this as a *feel-good* verse, to justify that God is going to bless everything they do. However, to do so is to neglect the backstory. God's people were in exile when this was written, a people who were just as prone to neglect God's Word *then* as people can be *today*.

Despite your (potential) familiarity with Jeremiah 29:11, have you taken time to consider, perhaps savor, the words that follow? Like many today, those living in exile could have held to the precious words of Jeremiah 29:11 so tightly, while neglecting the words that followed:

In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you," says the Lord.

Why is it so important for there to be margin in my life for God's Word?

Because he promises to be found by you.

The Creator of the universe has given us His holy word to speak to us. When you seek him, you will find him and be found by Him. Psalm 105:4 says, *Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually*. When trials come and everything is stripped away, it reveals what our foundation is built upon. Is it God's Word? Is it a person, a job, money, attention?

When we seek the Lord's face we are entering into His presence. We get to hear from Him! He promises to speak to us through His Word if we will just show up to be *with* Him. It is His gift to us! Our Creator is waiting to speak to you today; spend time with Him! God has created margin for us! As those who are privileged to have a relationship with the Lord, we are invited to seek and to find Him continually!

When was the last time you honestly sought the face of the Lord?

What are the things that are preventing you from spending time with God? In other words, what does your life speak about more important than God?

What are some practical ways to rest in the grace and presence of God this week?

Caroline Garner, Student Worship Associate

DAY NINE: 'Push Back'

"And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son.

You shall call his name Ishmael,⁴ because the Lord has listened to your affliction.

So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing,"⁵ for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me."⁶ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi;⁷ it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

Genesis 16:11, 13-14 ESV

I like routine. My first task after breakfast is to make a list on a yellow pad of what I think needs to be done that day. These items usually fall under two categories: *people* and *projects*. On Monday I would have listed the "to do's" of the week which I pull from for each day, plus appointments from my calendar. Well, by the time I have completed my list, I am already overwhelmed. How can I do all this? The result is a feeling of being "pushed" all day. That is not very pleasant or conducive to being led by the Spirit.

Fortunately, very early on, I was encouraged to make use of the Scriptures early in the day. I have kept this habit more or less ever since. Its effects are various. Sometimes I feel as dull as a fence post, taking in almost nothing. *Well, what to do?* Grunt ahead. Just because I don't "feel" as I would like, Scripture is never the less true. Carry on till my emotions catch up. But thankfully, something read (or studied as time allows) does impress with "joyful discovery," usually in the form of some principle which can have broad application.

Such as today. List of "to-dos," long. Pressure, rush, rush to get it done. Reading Hagar's experience at being cast out by Sarah's mistreatment, and that with no resources. In her extreme distress an angel (messenger) of God was sent to her with word that she and her to-be-born child were under His watchful eye: "The Lord has listened to your affliction" (Gen. 16:11). The spring of water where she heard God's message was thereafter called Beer-lahai-roi, "The well of The Living One who sees me." Three sure truths for this pushy day: Reality one, God is 'The Living One', as His very name proclaims "I AM." Reality two, "He sees." And three, even better, 'He sees me.' In Scripture when God sees, He acts. That's encouragement for this day no matter how my list goes (Or how I feel).

Mike Blackwood serves as an Elder

⁴ Ishmael means *God hears*

⁵ Or *You are a God who sees me*

⁶ Hebrew *Have I really seen him here who sees me?* or *Would I have looked here for the one who sees me?*

⁷ *Beer-lahai-roi* means *the well of the Living One who sees me*

DAY TEN: You Are Not Enough

*"Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.
Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction."*

Psalm 1:1-6 NIV

Something I often forget is that the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life is such an incredible gift from God. He is our comforter, our guide, and our ever-present help in times of need. The infinite God we serve is never surprised by our finiteness. God is aware of my weaknesses, my shortcomings, and the burden I feel to get everything done perfectly in my own strength. I am terrible at remembering to rest and letting God be in control. Satan loves for me to get so caught up in "ministry" that I disconnect from the Father to serve in my own power - he knows how ineffective that makes me.

However, when I remember the Truth, I am reminded that God calls us *first* to rest. He calls us to abide. He calls us *first* to know Him, to love Him, and to enjoy Him. God doesn't NEED us to do ministry or to accomplish His plans, but He CHOOSES to use us. He calls us to Himself *first* as His son or daughter, and then we are sent on mission to share with others the joy and the freedom of walking in right relationship with Christ. The Lord continues to bring John 15:5 to my mind, "*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*" God's Word is what prepares us, equips us, and transforms us into His likeness. Apart from the transforming power of time with God in His Word, we cannot accomplish the work He calls us to, because we are working out of our own strength, rather than the power of Christ.

The counter-cultural truth of Scripture is this: **believer, you are not enough.** The sweet truth is, God never called us to be enough on our own and this is why He sent Christ. Jesus is sufficient for you and for me and "*His power is made perfect in our weakness.*" Christ has taken on the burden of our shame and guilt and struggle and has called us to lean into Him. To rest at His feet in His Word. Prioritizing time in God's Word is a discipline, but it is the most important part of our day. I encourage you to sit at the feet of the Lord now and spend time re-reading and meditating on Psalm 1:1-6. I pray that your greatest delight will be studying the precepts of God's Word, and that you will yield to the power of the Spirit as God equips you for every good work that He's prepared beforehand for you to walk in.

Addison Stancil, High School Ministry Associate

week three:

Margin for Prayer

DAY ELEVEN: Be Still...

*“Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth!”*

Psalm 46:10 ESV

I'd like to share with you what God has been bringing to my attention recently. I know that I need a margin between the load I'm trying to carry and the capacity that I have, but living in a world that prizes constant activity and ceaseless striving allows me to make excuses for why I've allowed the margin to be erased. We are constantly surrounded by messages telling us to *go faster, work harder, keep pushing for more*. These messages are always there in our pockets calling to us, or in my case, in my hand telling me that I don't have time to pause.

This way of living reminds me of watching hamsters run on a wheel, where we seem to be wearing ourselves out but not really getting where we truly want to go. And into this *Hot Mess* I call life comes good news from Psalm 46:10:

“Be still and know that I am God...”

These words are a profound invitation from our Creator for MARGIN in the midst of the hustle and bustle of our lives by pausing, quieting our hearts and recognizing His Presence, all in the context of spending time with Him in prayer.

Have you ever wondered why God tells us to be still? To me It doesn't seem very heroic, efficient, or useful to be still with quiet hearts. We'd rather be doing something, because if you're like me, you're trained to hate stillness. **Yet this stillness is the medicine we need.** For it's in the stillness that we're invited to cultivate a deep and personal relationship with our Creator. It's in this stillness that we're transformed by finding strength in his presence and rest in His loving arms.

To be still is not passive idleness but an intentional posture of surrender. To be still is an act of faith, where we acknowledge that our Creator is in control of our circumstances. When we give up control and trust in Him, we experience true freedom and peace that goes beyond any human understanding.

Today, this week, amidst the hustle and bustle of life, take some time to be still. Pause, breathe, turn off your phone and spend time with your Creator who knows you better than you know yourself. Allow Him to surround you with his love and peace. Open your heart to His gentle whisper in Psalm 46:10, and allow His presence to fill you. In the stillness you will find that he is GOD, faithful, tender, and compassionate toward you.

Kevin Cox serves as an Elder

DAY TWELVE: Sustaining, Empowering, Healing Prayer

*Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed.
The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*

James 5:16 NKJV

Have you ever had a day that changed your life quickly, dramatically, and unexpectedly? For me, that day was March 15, 2021, the day when I was diagnosed with cancer. That day was followed by many more days of testing, surgery, chemo, and radiation.

The biggest obstacle I faced was my allergic reaction to the chemo drugs. This started a cycle of steroids and Benadryl that kept my reactions in check but came with their own side effects. It got to the point that my original six rounds of chemo were reduced to four, with the last two rounds administered in ICU so the nurses could keep me closely monitored.

Looking back on that time, it was quite awful, though I didn't feel the extreme of it in the moment. Those six months changed me in many ways. But the biggest lesson I learned was that a person can persevere through pain, suffering, and fear because of the prayers of God's people. I believe *100-percent* that it was prayer that carried me through each treatment, each hospital trip, and each allergic reaction. There is no other way to explain the things I experienced during that season in my life.

Because of my experience, I now understand the importance of creating margin in my life for prayer. I've never been one that can keep my concentration long enough to pray for long periods of time. So, I use two practical strategies to create this margin. My first strategy is when I wake up in the morning. Before I even get out of bed, I pray for those on my heart. I pray for those that I know are enduring hard times, medical treatments, relational heartache, and/or spiritual battles. I find once the day starts, it is harder to find this margin, so I prioritize it first thing.

I implement my second strategy throughout the day. As I write a card, return an email, send a text, or get off a phone call, I pray for that person immediately. I don't save it for later. Later is where we forget. I drop what I am doing and pray that very second.

Is there anything more precious than God's people praying each other through hard times? The unexplained strength, the moments of complete peace, the motivation to keep going all come from the power of prayer. That is my experience. I will never again minimize the importance of praying for my brother or sister who is suffering. I hope my experience will encourage you to find some margin in your life to do the same.

Mindy Dooley, Welcoming and Membership Director

DAY THIRTEEN: Unshakable Assurance

*"Surely the righteous will never be shaken; they will be remembered forever.
They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord.*

Psalm 112:6-7 NIV

Ok, I admit it: I'm a news addict. Most days the first tabs I open on my browser are my favorite news websites. The last is a sports site that I hope has lighter stories, but somehow often brings more bad news. I even return to those sites throughout the day to see what other discouragement they can deliver.

And I'm the guy that tells my parents that reading the news is a waste of time because there's no good news to be found. The same guy who so often asks why only bad things happen. Who is often pessimistic about the future and wastes time worrying about the things I can't control.

A few weeks ago, I read (from Psalm 112:6-7)

*Surely the righteous will never be shaken; they will be remembered forever.
They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD.*

I asked: *why, given all the promises I have as a follower of Christ, do I fear bad news each day?* Could it be that since my days are filled with the news of the world, there is no room left to hear God's voice? To hear Him reminding that nothing surprises Him? To miss what He is doing and calling me to be a part of?

It's easy to only think of prayer as us asking God for things. Blessings, healing, peace, or direction. But God's word tells us (from John 10:3-4):

The gatekeeper opens the gate for [the shepherd], and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

Not only does prayer allow us to ask from a Holy God on His throne, but it also allows us to hear our Shepherd, our High Priest, as He encourages, teaches, guides, and reassures us. If we don't hear Him, it may not be because He is not speaking. It may be that the volume of other things in our lives is too loud for us to hear His voice. Psalm 145:18 says:

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

Jason Moore serves as an Elder

DAY FOURTEEN: Let Your Walls Down

“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus..”

Philippians 4:6-7 ESV

At an early age I was taught the importance of keeping prayer central in my life. Praying came naturally and, if asked, my family and friends would say I am a “prayer warrior”.

So why is it praying for myself is so difficult?

For others, I will pray around the clock.

For myself, I am not nearly as diligent.

Philippians 4:6 says “...by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.”

I’ve always felt guilty praying for myself. But in 2019, that slowly began to change.

The spring of that year started a period of 3 ½ years that not only changed my life but changed how I prayed. During those weeks and months, since there was already a rhythm of prayer in my life, it was natural to pray through my struggle. My anxiety and frustration in my circumstances led me to raw and honest prayers.

Slowly, as I let my walls down, it became easier to bring my requests to the Lord. Being honest with myself led to a transparency in my prayer life that wasn’t there before.

I have found that making space in my life for prayer made space for God to do the miraculous.

I had seen it happen in the lives of others.

It happened in my life after humble prayers that were honest and earnest. That is why it is so important for there to be margin in my life for prayer.

Maybe today you already have a time for prayer set aside. As you pray, what requests can you present to the Lord for yourself in humility with gratefulness?

Or, perhaps, you’re learning the importance of having margin for prayer. Don’t be afraid to be honest with the Lord. He can handle it.

Wherever you are today, remember, the Lord wants to hear from you, His child, through prayer.

April Meehan, Production Director

DAY FIFTEEN: Watchmen on the Wall

*“On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen;
all the day and all the night they shall never be silent.*

*You who put the LORD in remembrance, take no rest, and give him no rest
until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.”*

Isaiah 62:1-4 ESV

Watchmen were posted on walls surrounding ancient cities, responsible to be on the lookout for approaching messengers who were bearing good news or approaching enemies who were threatening the city. Watchmen called-out the hours of the night, and in some cases, served to protect the city from violence themselves.

In this scene from Isaiah 62, God’s watchmen are prophets who were tasked to intercede for the people, incessantly reminding them of the work that had yet to be complete, announcing that there was coming a day when God Himself would enter Jerusalem to complete His redemptive work. And there was also coming a day, upon His return, He Himself will reign from Zion, which will be lifted high and established as the praise of the whole earth (Mic. 4:1-5). Everything *here* points to Jesus, His death on the cross, His resurrection from the grave, and His second coming. Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17) and the One of whom all Scripture ultimately testifies (John 5:46).

As followers of Jesus, we are His watchmen, posted on the ‘walls’ of our neighborhoods and the nations to herald the Gospel, the Good News of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life made available through faith in Jesus. And while we rest in the finished work of Jesus on our behalf, our work continues and is only finished at our last breath or the day He returns, whichever comes first. Until then, there remains work to do for the kingdom.

Watchmen have a zeal for God’s will to be done. This is what it means for us to pray as Jesus taught us, *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. As intercessors, watchmen are people who intercede, who intervene on behalf of others (individuals, people groups, nations); who give themselves no rest, praying continually, and doing so *with faith* on behalf of God’s heart.

I don’t know about you, but I can’t imagine where my life would be without faithful intercessors, watchmen that the LORD has posted on the wall on my behalf. Throughout the course of my life, and particularly over the last two decades of ministry, I can identify so many people who incessantly prayed for me, who were on the lookout for me spiritually, who cried out for me, sometimes doing so day and night, asking for God’s will to be done in my life. For many of these people, it wasn’t necessarily about having margin in their life for prayer; prayer *was* the work to be done for the kingdom. I can barely comprehend the number of times the prayers and intercession of these watchmen served to sustained me, empowered me, and protected me over the years.

Who are the watchmen, the intercessors who God has posted on the walls on your behalf? To what, to whom is God calling you be a watchman until the work is finished? Where is God calling you into greater faithfulness and devotion to be His watchman for the sake of the Gospel?

Chris Shelton, Pastor of Local Missions

week four:

Margin for Generosity

DAY SIXTEEN: Crazy Generosity

*“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart,
not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”*

2 Corinthians 9:7 ESV

I grew up in a home with hard working parents who often worked multiple jobs to make ends meet. We always had enough, but I can remember even as a young child that finances were tight. What I was even more aware of though was my parents' incredible generosity. Even with their own limited finances, my parents were constantly giving to others. They gave food, lent money they knew they'd never get back, helped neighbors and friends with broken down vehicles, farm equipment, and household chores. I've often wondered as I've gotten older how they possibly could have had the money or time to help as much as they helped so many people over the years. Somehow, my parents learned from a very early age to always have margin to help others.

In 2 Corinthians 9, Paul is encouraging, perhaps even reminding, the Corinthians in the sending of their offering to Jerusalem. He encourages them to follow through with their commitment to give, but he is also concerned about the state of their heart in the giving. Throughout Scripture, it's clear that God intends for His people to be givers. It's also clear, as in the case of the Corinthians, that God's main concern with our giving is our heart. Second Corinthians 9:7 says, “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Giving, not reluctantly or under compulsion, is a big deal and is key to our giving. Our generosity is to be an act of worship and not just something we feel like we have to do.

Living generously doesn't come naturally to everyone. I'm not sure how my parents pulled it off, as kids of parents who'd lived through the depression. But their generosity has continued throughout their lives. They have modeled for my husband and me how to live generously, even in times of financial struggle. I've learned that generosity often looks completely crazy to the outside world, probably not terribly unlike the generosity of the Corinthians giving to other Christians they didn't even know. I've also learned that generosity, the kind that looks crazy to the world and brings great joy to the giver, is not something that you can always plan. It's more of a lifestyle of faith and a willingness to make recurring ridiculous leaps of faith to give, even in times when we don't have much money or time. The margin that we really need is not more of those things (time and money), but the spiritual margin to be obedient, even when it seems a little crazy.

Lord, give me the margin to live generously, fully relying on your provision, and fully obedient to your call to give.

Tracey Allred, Director of Care and Support

DAY SEVENTEEN: The Provider of 400 Billion Birds

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life??

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Matthew 6:25-27, 33-34 *ESV*

Imagine a life without financial worry. No stress about bills to pay, inflation, or getting out of debt. No concern about maintaining your salary, saving enough, or losing what you’ve saved up in a market decline or bank failure.

For most of us, that feels unreachable, yet God calls us to something even higher. Not only can we live free from anxiety about money, but God also calls us to joyfully follow His path of radical generosity.

This may sound nice, but the obstacles are real. You might think, *“Money is tight now, and I’m supposed to be giving more of it away? I just don’t have the bandwidth to do that right now.”* This lack of margin often creates stress and guilt, and it can lead us to doubt God’s promises.

So how do we respond to these high callings of God that seem impossible? Perhaps a good starting point is to examine our hearts and ask the question, *“What lies am I believing that are robbing me of margin in my life?”*

Here are two such lies to get the wheels turning:

- 1. I need to grind and save as much as possible, because the future is uncertain. In the end, I can’t count on anyone else to provide for me.*
- 2. I have a right to enjoy my money that I’ve worked so hard to save. Life is hard. What fun is it going to be if I can’t do some things I want to do?*

There are elements of truth in both of these, but ultimately, believing these lies will rob our joy and build up an ever-increasing tension.

The words of Jesus in Matthew 6 are some of the most relevant and freeing to those of us struggling for financial margin. [*Pause here and take some time to read verses 19-34*]

Related to lie #1, we’re told to ponder the life of birds as they don’t store up barnfuls of food and yet are fed daily by God. Some researchers estimate that there are over 400 billion birds on Earth. God orchestrates the world to provide for them. How much more will He, as loving Father, orchestrate all circumstances to provide for you. *“Therefore, do not be anxious,”* as verse 34 states.

Related to lie #2, we’re not instructed to just forget about enjoyment and stop being selfish. Instead, Jesus turns our eyes to the true, imperishable kingdom. As we do this, we can walk in a deeper love with our Father who not only provides but bestows glorious blessings on us.

So, with our hearts rejoicing in our infinitely generous Father and our eyes fixed on His kingdom, let us unclench our hands from our possessions. Let us give cheerfully, trusting that God will provide.

Turner Krebs serves as a Deacon

DAY EIGHTEEN: An Outward, God-ward Perspective

*“Whoever brings blessing will be enriched,
and one who waters will himself be watered.*

Proverbs 11:25 *ESV*

Most of the time when we feel overloaded and desire margin, we focus on ourselves and try to create more time and space for ourselves by downsizing or even saying *no* to activities or people. We become self-absorbed and our gaze turns inward.

When we turn our gaze outward to Jesus, we see that He set the supreme example for us by coming to earth *“not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45).

We are called to follow his example:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility consider one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus . . . (Philippians 2:3-5)

Jesus certainly understood the time pressures, the burden of people making requests of Him on a daily basis, and the difficulty of finding time to recharge. He did not heal all who came his way and He sought time away from His disciples as well as the crowds. *Yet* He gave generously, and out of that His Father created the margin and provided times of nourishment necessary for Him to do His work on earth.

As we seek God’s wisdom to create proper margin in our lives, let us look to the One who offers living water to all who ask. When we focus outward and not inward, we see that generosity, instead of draining us, fills us and refreshes us. The key is being sensitive to the guidance and prodding of the Spirit as we live day to day.

Spencer Tilley *serves as an Elder*

DAY NINETEEN: Why Wait?

"You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."

2 Corinthians 9:11 *ESV*

Before joining Westover staff, my previous profession related to start-up technology product companies. In 1996, God gave me a great idea for a useful product. I felt led to pursue this opportunity, expending my own funds to pay staff and all company expenses. It was a big risk – and money was tight. Like most (naïve) entrepreneurs, I thought that the product would be highly successful.

During the early days of the company, I ran across an article about a local college student named Allen who was shot by a stray bullet, causing him to be a quadriplegic. Allen's situation touched me deeply. I remember saying to myself, *if someday this business was really successful, I would love to step in and help a young man like this in a real way.*

Then the Lord put on my heart – *Why wait? Why not feel successful today?*

A visit to a small house in east Greensboro led to a beautiful friendship with this young Christian man. The first meetings were about getting to know each other, with Allen discussing his depression in broken sentences through a respirator. As I began to learn his needs, God put on my heart to help. Part of that help was assembling a team from our company who would install technology that would allow Allen to communicate using speech-to-text and devices that responded to breath or winks. The team loved getting to know Allen.

One day, in the middle of my challenges and frustrations in the start-up company, I called Allen driving home. He spoke with excitement about what was going on in his life. I asked him directly if there was anything I could do to help. He said *no*; he was doing fine.

Then he said, *"What can I say, I'm just blessed."*

As you might imagine, any concern I had in life evaporated when I heard those words.

Allen worked hard, and surrounded by a big group of friends and family, moved on to eventually graduate from UNCG. He spoke to groups about his life and faith before ultimately succumbing to a viral infection.

Before I met Allen, I had an overly demanding job, limited funds, and a wife and three young children (at the time) that I needed more time with. Did I *really* have time or resources to help a stranger?

Getting to know this faith-filled courageous young man was truly a gift from God. Spirit-led generosity created margin for what was truly meaningful. Where might God be calling you to be generous *now* instead of waiting to be generous?

Alan Neely, Director of Disciple-Making

DAY SIXTEEN: Off the Top

“Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.”

1 Corinthians 16:1-4 ESV

Here, we’re given a glimpse of a systematic approach to financial giving in the early church. The Apostle Paul is providing instructions for the collection of an offering for the Jerusalem church and to bring relief to those likely impoverished due to a famine. Despite the many problems circulating in the Corinthian church (things addressed throughout *this* first letter), Paul is inviting these Gentile-Christians to participate in something bigger than themselves while also understanding their place within the global community of believers. In describing life within the Body of Christ, Paul says in chapter 12, verse 26: *If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it.* This is not only true among members of a local church, but it’s also true among all Christ-centered, biblically-grounded churches that make up the collective, global Body of Christ.

Generosity was, and still is, how Jesus **provides** for his Church, and *through* his Church to bring **relief** to human needs *both* near and abroad. Generosity is *also* part of the **remedy** to the messes and the self-centeredness that often distract us from our Gospel-mission *both* individually and collectively. Therefore, we give not only for the sake of others but for the sake of ourselves.

The people of God have always been called to be generous with their time, talents, and treasures, contributing to a culture of generosity. Like Paul’s guidance for creating a consistent, responsible culture of generosity in the Corinthian church, we too need an intentional plan (or rhythm) to make the most of our generosity, which includes margin for giving. Here’s what the biblical teaches us about generosity and why having margin is so critical to our own spiritual growth:

Biblical generosity teaches that God owns it all and *you* are a steward of *His* resources.

Biblical generosity teaches *not* to live on the full percentage of your income, but to create margin up-front for giving.

Biblical generosity teaches you to give first (on the first day), **right off the top** from you *firstfruits* instead of from your leftovers (*first* and *best*). And when you give *first*, biblical generosity teaches you to be a better steward of the remainder of your income.

Biblical generosity doesn’t wait for ideal circumstances to give. Ecclesiastes 11:4 (TLB) warns, *If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done.* Don’t say you’ll start giving *only* when you’re able. Seek first the priorities of the Kingdom of God by giving *now* and *regularly*, allowing your generosity to increase over time.

Proverbs 11:25 says, *The generous will prosper; those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.* Biblical generosity shifts our thinking from, *I can’t afford to give*, to, *I can’t afford not to give.* We were made to be generous, we have a *need* to be generous, because we are created in the image and likeness of a generous, giving God! What does your generosity reveal about your relationship with God?

Chris Shelton, Pastor of Local Missions

week five:

Margin for Missional Living

DAY TWENTY-ONE: From Meager to Miraculous

Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way."

Matthew 15:29-39 ESV

Have you ever been in a situation where you were up against a major challenge in your life, but you felt totally, completely drained? That's where I was in March of 2022. The 6 months leading up to that were some of the hardest my family had faced. In late 2020, we had a providential opportunity to move from Greensboro and buy a little fixer-upper in Summerfield in the same neighborhood as my parents, who were gracious enough to let us move in with them while our home renovations were underway. And while during this time we saw God's hand at work in ways that very much blessed us, we encountered a series of physical, financial, and emotional challenges, culminating with my mother's breast cancer recurring. In an effort to fight off the disease, my parents moved to Arizona to seek treatment from a specialist. However, Mom ultimately passed away from the disease while there. It felt like our plans and visions for the future were falling apart.

A few weeks after Mom's funeral, our house was finally finished, and it was time to move in. We had two PODs sitting in our driveway waiting to be unloaded, and we were exhausted in every sense of the word. It's always hard to ask for help - it's especially hard to ask for help with something as terrible as moving, but that's where we were. We honestly could not do it alone. What happened next was an act of compassion, and to me, in the state I was in, felt about as miraculous as food appearing out of nowhere on a mountainside.

Two guys who I knew from a men's workout group, along with one's 16-year-old son, came over one afternoon and took the lead in completely unpacking every last box, piece of furniture, and random item that we had managed to cram in those PODs at the last minute before we had to be out. Their compassion for us drove them to sacrifice *their time* so that, as a result, *we would have more*. These were people with schedules probably just as busy as mine and yours, but compassion drove them to help. **Their willingness to live missionally created margin in our lives in a very real, tangible way.**

My mind immediately went to Matthew 15:29-39 I was beginning to think through this devotional. Christ had shown his power to those on the mountainside with him, performing one miraculous healing after another for three days straight. But hallelujah that our God is not only powerful; He is compassionate as well. Christ's compassion for the hungry people drove those that were with him to offer what little they had in order for him to transform it to meet the real and pressing needs around them. It's Christ's compassion that stirs in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. And it's Christ's power that transforms our meager acts into something that can feel miraculous.

The questions I'm asking myself in reflection:

What are the situations around me where I feel Christ stirring His compassion in my heart?

Am I willing to help, even if I feel my contribution might not be significant, trusting God's power?

Ryan Neely serves as an Elder

DAY TWENTY-TWO: Choose Mission

“Jesus, grilled by the Pharisees on when the kingdom of God would come, answered, “The kingdom of God doesn’t come by counting the days on the calendar. Nor when someone says, ‘Look here!’ or, ‘There it is!’ And why? Because God’s kingdom is already among you.””

Luke 17:20-21 *The Message*

Having margin in your life is an intentional choice. Margin does not come by chance, fate, or luck. Having margin means CHOOSING to carve out mental, emotional, and physical space so that you can have the capacity to serve and to bless others.

You choose margin so that you can have the potential to choose mission.

Mission is where the kingdom of God intersects with our lives and our own humanity. The daily interactions you have with others, the connections, the encounters, the time you offer to other people; this is where mission meets margin. If God’s kingdom is already among us, or in our midst, as Jesus tells us in this passage, do you have the space (mentally, emotionally, and physically) to respond to it?

Is there space for the kingdom of God in your daily life? Do you have time and mental energy for the interruptions of life? For the phone call from a friend who just needs to talk, for the homeless woman on the corner who just needs a ride, for the neighbor who just wants to borrow a tool but really needs to have a conversation and be seen and heard; are you able to accept and step into the interruptions of your day in order to meet people where they are?

Margin gives you the ability to embrace the interruptions that this beautiful kingdom of God brings with it. When you intentionally choose to allow space in your life mentally, emotionally, and physically, your hands and heart can be free and open to respond to the kingdom of God.

What does allowing space or making space look like? Maybe it’s rethinking your calendar and saying *no* to some things, people, or events...maybe it’s clearing some clutter in your home so that your physical space matches your mental space...maybe it’s putting in place some boundaries with family or friends that are emotionally toxic. These are choices that require purpose, some deliberate and willing thought and execution, which is not always easy.

Choose margin so that you can choose mission. Be purposeful, thoughtful, and intentional with the things you have control over so that *when* the interruptions come, the choice to embrace those interruptions can come more easily. Where do you need to choose to make space, to create some margin, so that you can embrace what God is doing in his kingdom that is right here in our midst?!

Molly Shelton, Missional-Mom, and wife of Chris

DAY TWENTY-THREE: Able to Obey

*“And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’
Then I said, ‘Here I am! Send me.’*

Isaiah 6:8 *ESV*

As we have been reminded over the last few weeks, margin is important for so many reasons. Without it, we can quickly find ourselves restricted, unable to easily change plans, respond in a timely way to unexpected needs, or simply obey God when He calls us to move.

Many of us have likely felt this *restriction* at times. If you’ve ever had an appliance break that you couldn’t afford to fix, you may have been wishing for some financial margin. If you’ve had to pass up a sudden opportunity because you were too busy with something else, you may have benefited from a little more margin in your schedule.

In the same way, it is important that we leave margin in our lives for missional living. The reason for this is simple – we never know when God is going to present us an opportunity to share His love. Isaiah 6 tells the story of Isaiah’s commission, where he was presented an opportunity to serve the Lord with his life in verse 8:

*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’
Then I said, ‘Here I am! Send me.’*

As believers, we all hope we would answer the call as Isaiah did, but the question we need to ask ourselves is, *‘If God called me to do something for Him today, could I say yes?’* The question is not whether we are WILLING to obey God, but rather are we ABLE to obey Him. Are we positioned in a way that we can respond to God and say *“Here I am! Send me”*? If a neighbor has a family emergency and needs someone to take care of their kids for a day, could I help? If a family member needs a ride across town, could they rely on me? If a friend is facing a difficult situation, would I take the time to stop and pray?

Missional living does not have to be a long-term mission trip to a far away place. It can happen right here in our own backyard, in our day-to-day lives. So, let’s ask ourselves again. *‘If God called me to do something for Him today, could I say yes?’ Do I have the margin to respond to God’s call right now, right where I am?*

We live in a world that is desperate for the love of Jesus and God’s plan to share that love with the world comes through His people. Let’s choose margin in our lives so that we can respond to missional opportunities. Can you honestly say to God right now, right where are, Here I am! Send me.? If not, why not?

Ben Evans, *Pastor of Children’s Ministries*

DAY TWENTY-FOUR: Broken Hearts

*“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’
If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail..”*

Isaiah 58:6-11 ESV

What breaks your heart? Is it the homeless man standing at a street corner, impoverished, hungry and humiliated? Is it the single mom who’s exhausted doing everything she can to make ends meet for her and her children? Is it the widow(er) who spends their days alone and lonely? Is it the refugee who, who by no fault of their own, finds themselves a stranger navigating a strange new place, starting their lives all over? Is it the child who has experienced unwantedness and neglect, who desperately needs someone who is willing to fight for her? Is it the young man with special needs? The young woman who has been abused? The father or the son who’s been in a battle with addiction he seems to keep losing?

What breaks your heart? Earlier in my ministry career, I worked for an international relief organization whose founder was famously quoted saying, *Let my heart be broken for the things that break the heart of God.* I still find myself asking God to break my heart for many things. However, several years ago, it occurred to me how my heart could never break for *all* that God’s heart breaks for. For one, my heart could never bear it.

In his book, *You’re Only Human*, author and professor, Kelley Kapic, offers a helpful perspective:

Today I am caring for prisoners in jail; I am evangelizing the disenfranchised in Nepal; I am praying over the sick child in the hospital; I am serving the recovering victims of sex trafficking; I am standing against racial injustice; and I am caring for widows. And I am doing so much more. How? I am doing all of this because I am part of the living body of Christ. God’s Spirit has united me to Christ and, because of that union, to my sisters and brothers of the faith. We are one. I am part of the church, both local and global. Obviously I can’t personally do all of these things in a single day, nor even in a single lifetime; however, my church actively pours itself out in love for our neighborhood, the larger city, and farther as we extend ourselves out to the world.

Each of our hearts break for something. And while our hearts may not ache as deeply over the same things, when we bring our broken hearts together as the church, the body of Christ, we more accurately and comprehensively reflect God's heart – a heart that not only breaks over the brokenness of His creation, but a heart that is moved by compassion to heal, to redeem, to set free, to restore, to save. Missional-living is about our broken hearts being moved to action out of the compassion of Jesus. Kopic continues:

Our church is just one of the vast number of churches scattered throughout the world. As part of God's church, we have people doing prison ministry, caring for children, feeding the hungry, praying, preaching, and caring for orphans and widows. I am not the body—I am just a part of it. But together, the body works well and reflects the Messiah's heart as it participates in his actions of love, healing, and service. As part of the church that is reigned over by the ascended Christ and empowered by his Spirit, we are collectively able to do even greater deeds than Jesus did before his death and resurrection (John 14:12). God now normally (though not exclusively) does his redemptive work in and through us, his church. I am not the Messiah. And neither are you. Nor is your pastor. But together—resting in the finished work of Christ and empowered by the Spirit—together we carry out the Father's compassion and love by participating in his holy work. We do this as the body of Christ. We are sheep, and because the Shepherd loves us, we together follow and imitate him.

How can we not make room in our lives for this, when God has moved heaven and earth to make room for us? And should you think, *Well, I'm too messy, too broken for God to use me*, consider the words of the late Henri Nouwen in his book, *In the Name of Jesus*:

We are not the healers, we are not the reconcilers, we are not the givers of life. We are sinful, broken, vulnerable people who need as much care as anyone we care for. The mystery of ministry is that we have been chosen to make our own limited and very conditional love the gateway for the unlimited and unconditional love of God.

What breaks your heart? Where, to what, to whom is God inviting you to bear His heart? How is God speaking to you right now? What is He saying? Where do you need to create the necessary, plentiful margin in your life to be on-mission with Him?

Chris Shelton, Pastor of Local Missions

DAY TWENTY-FIVE: Normal, but not Natural

“And [Jesus,] calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?”

Mark 8:34-37 ESV

Following Jesus’ first of three predictions concerning his coming betrayal, death, and resurrection, Jesus details the essence of “The normal Christian life” and the basics of discipleship, or what it means to follow Jesus. However, as one commentary notes, sadly in our day, what Jesus describes in Mark 8:34-37 looks more like “the radical Christian life” that the normal Christian life (*Exalting Jesus in Mark, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary*).

Jesus, in his own words, makes clear his intentions for his disciples in contrast to the intentions of our enemy: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly* (John 10:10), or as other translations put it, *life to the full* (NIV) or *life in all its fullness* (TLB). I particularly love how The Message paraphrases it: *I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of*. The point here is what Jesus wants for us – life. And Jesus shows the way to this life, one that consists of coming after him, denying yourself by taking up your cross, and following him. Come. Deny. Follow. While following Jesus this way might seem **radical**, it’s actually **normal**. At the same time, while this is the **necessary** path for any maturing disciple of Jesus, it’s anything but **natural**!

I heard someone say years ago that in life there tend to be two types of people (or two natures): Givers and Takers. The *Takers* always take more than they give, but in the end, experience emptiness. The *Givers* always give more than they take, and experience fullness of life. This is the paradox of the ways of the kingdom in contrast to the ways of this world. Coming after Jesus, following him, denying yourself by taking up your cross, can feel like a slow, painful death at times. That’s what happens when your self-centered nature experiences death. However, Jesus shows us that life worth living is a life of giving of ourselves for the glory of God and the Gospel!

Having margin in our lives to serve the heart of God by serving others can look radical at times, but its the way to experiencing life in its fullness, real and eternal life here on earth. When we don’t have margin in our lives to sacrificially serve others and to live on-mission for His Gospel, we risk losing the very life we’re trying to save.

Where and in what areas of your life is God calling you to create margin to serve others? Where are you experiencing depletion in your life? Is it possible that life and restoration might be found in giving yourself away rather than taking more time for yourself?

Chris Shelton, Pastor of Local Missions

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