

Greeting brothers and sisters at Grace Chapel.

My name is Elizabeth de Smaele and I will be your devotional guide for the Cultivate series. Karen Klassen, in her role as Grace's Spiritual Formations Co-ordinator, thought I would be able to meaningfully guide your community into a deeper devotional life throughout this series. I accepted her invitation with enthusiasm, and so we dig in together this week.

My assignment is to provide devotional material which will help you to engage deeply with God. I will be suggesting quite a variety of approaches, some of which will likely be new to you. I'm aware that every approach or activity won't resonate with everyone, but do ask that you simply show up with a willing heart and give it a go. There is a new blog linked at Grace's homepage where we encourage you to dialogue about your experience. Feel absolutely free to blog about what resonates with you and also what doesn't. We hope you'll participate in this initiative to encourage one another and build one another up in faith.

Maybe it's interesting for you to know that I'm writing from The Netherlands. I'm a long-time friend of Karen, a Canadian who graduated from Tyndale Seminary in Toronto with a Master of Divinity in spiritual formation. I'm a spiritual director and teacher in spiritual formation which I do under the ministry name Deeper Devotion. During our journey together, I will regularly provide you with links to my website with additional material to enrich your devotional journey. Here's the first one which will orient you to the kind of reading I encourage during these devotions, [formational reading](#).

Blessings to you all!

Elizabeth



Cultivate Love

1. God is love - Psalm 103:8-18

The Apostle John tells us that God *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16). Love is the perfect expression of God's character, and the reason for sending Jesus to Earth. Psalm 103 gives us one of the most beautiful expressions of this defining characteristic of God. In verse 7 David says that the LORD made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel. He then goes on to describe the LORD's 'ways' and 'deeds', which are all about love.

Read verses 8-18 of the psalm. Read it again, slowly, stopping to ponder the phrases which are ripe with meaning for you. As you reflect upon the scripture, notice your inner responses. Then, depending on what your response is like, choose one of the two activities below to do.

1. If your response is positive, perhaps one of gratitude, awe or something similar, try responding to the Psalm by praying it. This is how to approach this: Read one or two verses at a time (however much makes a complete thought) and then respond to what you have just read with your own prayer. Make it personal to your life, using David's words as prompts for your own words. Then carry on by reading the next verse and respond to it with your own prayer. Continue on until you've reached the end of the passage.

Note: This is also great to do as a group. Maybe you'll want to try it in your small group this week. I love this quote of Ben Campbell Johnson:

"Pray the psalms and very soon you will be praying your life." (*Time Away*)

2. If you notice a response of resistance within you, resist pushing the feeling aside or rushing away from this time with the Lord. Accept the resistance, for it has something to tell you. Notice what is connected with the feeling, and allow yourself the freedom to think back to an experience from which the resistance has emerged. If your thoughts say something like, "Yeah but I don't experience this kind of love from God", ask yourself why that is. Talk with the Lord about it. (Writing your thoughts in a journal may help you to express what's in your heart.) Once you feel you've been heard, gently read the words of Psalm 103 again, this time reading them as words of comfort to your injured heart.

Activity for this week: (This is counting on there being one clear night this week. You may choose to do it on your own or with a family member or friend.) Head outside for a few minutes after it is dark and look up to the stars. The size of the universe is a rather impossible to imagine, but think about it for a moment. There are hundreds of billions of galaxies in the universe, and our own Milky Way is but one of them. The universe seems to expand with every new technology made in an attempt to grasp it. What perspective does this give to what David says in Psalm 103:11?

As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.

Ponder that truth for a moment, allowing your ponderings to speak into your view of God. Respond to the Lord in prayer before you head back inside.

2. Love Story - Hosea 11:1-11

The biblical narrative can actually be read as one expansive love story, the epic tale of Yahweh's covenant love creating, forgiving, wooing, receiving, redeeming, transforming and, finally, perfecting human beings whom he made in his own image.

The book of Hosea depicts this love story quite poignantly as it tells a story of unrequited love. Yahweh's heartbreak over his people's betrayal is depicted in the life of the prophet Hosea. At the start of the book Yahweh instructs Hosea to marry an adulterous woman. She constantly turns away to other lovers, representing Israel who constantly turns her allegiance to other gods. Hosea continually brings her back home, a husband who loves her in spite of her unfaithfulness, just as the Lord receives Israel back to himself.

At the height of the book, Yahweh sings a song to his beloved. He is the spurned lover or the heart-sick parent whose heart is torn apart that his countless efforts to win Israel back have been fruitless. Israel has refused to listen, has remained unresponsive. What more can he do?

Turn to chapter 11 and read it thoughtfully. Hear the longing in Yahweh's plea, his cry of pain as he longs for Israel to simply respond to his love.

Return to read verses 1-4 and verse 8 again. What do you hear in the Lord's voice? Linger with a phrase that connects with you. Write it down and ponder it. What does it tell you about God's love for his people Israel? What does it tell you today about God's love for you? Say or write a prayer to God in response to what he has spoken to your heart.

3. A life of love - 1 John 4:9-12

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."

These four verses are dense with meaning. We find in these three sentences a living definition of love, an imperative to love, and a promise, each of these filling a sentence.

Read each sentence slowly and consider its meaning. What strikes you from each sentence? Perhaps there is a new meaning which you have never realized before. Maybe there is a depth of significance or impact which goes deeper than ever. Does the passage urge you to act, to live out your faith with greater intention?

Before you leave this time with God, talk with God about how the passage has spoken to you, and ask for the help to act upon what he has shown you. Recording your response will help you to remember it and will build in a reminder about what you have heard or learned today. Have you shared anything on the Grace blog yet? Perhaps there is something from today that you'd like to contribute.

4. Good Samaritan – Luke 10:25-37

As we consider the story of the Good Samaritan today, I'd like to guide you in a way of engaging with a biblical story which might be new to you. Gospel contemplation is a way of using your imagination to enter into an encounter between Jesus and people he encountered. You employ your imagination and senses as you reflect upon a biblical scene – some call it spiritual daydreaming -- so that the story becomes real to you. This is a natural process which painters have employed for centuries in order to interpret biblical scenes on canvas, and authors and movie directors use to make a scene come to life in a novel or on the screen. I've found it to be very powerful in bringing a story alive, and in helping me to engage in a living encounter with the Lord. Are you ready to give it a try?

Read the story two or three times so that the narrative is fresh in your mind. The story takes place on the road which descends steeply down the rocky decline from the mountains which surround Jerusalem to the plain of the Jordan, 400 meters below sea level. Close your eyes and try to picture the surroundings. If you've not been to Israel and can't picture it, don't let that hinder you. Picture yourself in any canyon you know; accuracy isn't the point of this exercise.

Let the drama unfold in your mind as you picture the Samaritan being attacked and robbed, and then the three men passing by. If you were a film director, how would you want to depict the scene? Which details, sights and sounds would you include? What emotions would you desire to emote in your listener?

Now place yourself in the scene. Are you a bystander to the exchange between Jesus and the expert of the law to whom Jesus tells the story? Are you one of the characters in the scene? Let the scene play before you again. What do you see? What do you feel? How do you respond? What is the message which Jesus seems to be saying to you?

Respond to Jesus and to what has been revealed to you through this encounter. It would be valuable to write down your experience and the effect it had on you. Perhaps you'd like to share the significance of this exercise with your small group or with a friend from Grace Chapel this Sunday. And of course, for those who love to blog a good story, here is your chance!

Enjoy [gospel contemplation](#)?
(An article I wrote based on this approach)

CULTIVATE
rooted and built up in Him