

Week One:

Let's Begin at the Beginning: Our Life Story

Guide: The Memories That Have Shaped Us



This is the first week of a thirty-four-week journey. We begin at the beginning—our story. Prayer is about our relationship with God. We will begin to grow in this relationship with God, in the midst of our everyday lives this week, by simply reflecting upon our own story. There may be times we will want to take a period of prayer to reflect upon our story this week. What is most important, however, is that we begin by letting this reflection become the *background* of our week.

Did you ever get a song in your head and realize that it was there for a long time, no matter what you were doing? This is like that. Throughout our day, each day this week, we will have in mind the *memories* that have shaped us.

Let this be the image: This week, let's go through the photo album of our life. Let's go back to our earliest memories. Let's let the Lord show us our lives. What pictures are there? With each part of my life, what scenes do I remember? Who is in those scenes? Some photos will be of happy times, some will be quite sad, others will be difficult to recollect at all. They all constitute our story and the journey that has brought us to where we begin this retreat.

Take it easy. Go slowly. Take a little bit each day. Being faithful to this exercise will help tremendously to prepare for the weeks ahead. Write down notes or memories or stories if you'd like.

End each day, before going to bed, with a few interior words of gratitude to the One who has accompanied you through your life, even to this day of presence with you.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

The first and most important point is to begin this journey with great hope and confidence. God is never outdone in generosity. So, if we make even a small change in our weekly pattern, that is a tremendous *opening* for God to work in us. One way to affirm this hope and confidence is to express it for just a brief instant, each morning, *at the same time each day*—as you're finding your slippers, or as you're brushing your teeth, or while pouring that first cup of coffee—"I know you are with me today, Lord."

Each of us will have a different amount of time we will be able to give to this retreat each week. We recommend that if your time is limited, just read the guide. On another day that week, you may find you have time to return to reflect on another resource.

This week's guide offers us the opportunity to review our life stories through the *photo album* of our lives. Throughout these weeks, we'll make use of the practice, habit, exercise of letting a reflection or image be part of the *background* of our day. All of us are aware, from time to time, of stuff that occupies the *background* of our consciousness. The song that plays in our head is a common example.

This retreat invites us to practice taking advantage of this facility of our brain. Rather than have that *space* filled *at random* with stuff that just comes and goes, we will *focus it more consciously*. While doing all the ordinary tasks we do in our everyday lives, we will be using that *background space* to give a distinctive *tone* to our week. This won't be a *distraction* to our work or take any extra time away from our work, but it will eventually make a difference in how we experience our work. It just takes practice.

Concretely, for this week, we all know the outline of our story. This isn't *new* material. What is new is that you will consciously be aware that you are reviewing your life story this week. You can plan it fairly deliberately—as an example: Monday and Tuesday, you could remember the images of your childhood; Wednesday and Thursday, your teens and early adulthood; Friday and Saturday, the rest of your adult life. So, throughout Wednesday—as you're finding your slippers, driving to work, walking to your first meeting, walking to the restroom, looking at that image on your monitor, walking to the parking lot, getting supper ready, sharing a memory with a family member, or undressing before going to bed—during all those brief *everyday times*, have in the *background* the formative images that shape your story during your teen years.

It's about *feelings*. Each *picture* in your life story has feeling attached to it. For example, I might look long and hard at that image of myself on the playground in fifth grade. Feelings come to the surface if I let them—or, the picture of myself in that relationship in my early twenties. We know there are feelings there. Powerful feelings are associated with the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, the change of jobs, terrible family crises, images that come to mind throughout your marriage, battles with people you've struggled with. Those feelings will help us *see* and *experience* how these pictures tell our stories, who we are today.

It's about *God's fidelity*. This isn't a sentimental journey. With every picture in your story, there is a grace offered to you as you *look for God's presence* there. If, throughout this week, you can imagine God's having been present there with you—even when you didn't notice or feel it at the time—that would be a tremendous grace unifying your life.

It's about *gratitude*. With every memory, every image and feeling, practice saying, "Thank you." Even the painful memories. Even if you were not grateful then. Even if it involved some bad stuff you did to yourself or to others. The Lord was there, loving you. Let gratitude now touch and span throughout the story of your life.

It's about *a journey*. This is only the beginning. We have thirty-four weeks. We will move slowly. And all we need to do is give God just a little space to transform our everyday lives, a moment at a time.

For the Journey: Expect God to Work

Do you know what's good for you? Knowing and then doing what we know is good for us are two distinct things.

I know that jogging is very good for my body and spirit, but going over to the recreation center is not only a good idea but also something I don't always want to do.

Taking vitamins is good for us, the medical profession tells us. We are just beginning to believe them, but we don't all take them all the time. We resist those activities that do not give us immediately the feedback we desire. We might begin a diet Monday morning, and then Tuesday morning we step lightly on the scale hoping to find less of us there. We want results and pretty darn quick!

We begin these weeks of exercising our spirits according to the pattern given by God to us through Ignatius Loyola, accompanied also by this human resistance to what is good for us.

The first guide, then, is this: do not expect, look for, or demand progress. Enjoy and live the process, even though, as with physical exercise, you might not like doing it every day. As with a diet, you might have to give something up, like time, activity, or accomplishments. We allow God to give the increase, the insights, the progress. We begin expecting God to be busy laboring on our part of creation, which we have found quite unfinished as a work of art.

This is the first guide along the way; don't stop here; the journey is worth the expense. Go for it!

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Lord,

This seems easy, going back through the photo album of my life. Can I really call this prayer? I can go back to my earliest memories of being a toddler. I wonder what connection this little child has to me?

As I move through my life, into school, learning to read and expanding my world, I can notice things in this album that I don't want to see. They are difficult memories that cause pain and I thought I had put them away permanently. Not everything in my childhood was good. Where were you in that, Lord? Were you with me as I watched the shouting, the arguing?

There were good times, too. Running so freely as a kid, climbing trees, exploring the banks of the creek, and sledding down the big hill in winter. There is a freedom to those moments and I sense you in that, too.

As I grew older, I made choices, Lord. For some of them, I ignored you completely and tried to pretend you didn't matter in my life. But you stayed with me so faithfully anyway. You guided my headstrong decisions into choices that helped me into a loving life and a good marriage.

Thank you, Lord, for your constant presence in my life, especially today.

Dear Lord,

I feel a little uncomfortable. This kind of prayer is new to me and I'm a little more comfortable using someone else's words. But I tried it yesterday and it wasn't hard; it just didn't always feel like prayer.

I return today and I look at the places where it hurts, the memories that make me want to squirm, pull away, and try to forget again. It hasn't always been easy in my life. Were you really with me in all of it? I feel you so strongly now, but I never thought much about you during those times.

How have these difficult times shaped me into what I am today? How has your faithful guidance helped me, unseen, over the years? Please help me to see your presence in my life and to be guided by it.

Scripture Readings

Luke 12:22–34

Isaiah 43:1–4

Luke 11:1–13

Psalm 8

Psalm 139