

## **The Amoeba**

Researchers at the University of California at Berkley introduced an amoeba into a perfect, stress-free environment. (The amoeba is a single-celled organism that lives in marine environments.) The temperature, moisture level and food supply were all perfect for the amoeba's survival. The amoeba needed to make no adjustments whatsoever. One would think that the amoeba simply live the good life, right? Yet oddly, the amoeba died.

The saying, "You're either green and growing or ripe and rotting" is quite apropos here. The amoeba needed to be challenged in order to multiply and grow. Without such challenge, it could not survive. This principle holds true for humans as well. Not only is it true in the general sense, it is true in just about every area of life, including the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of our selves. If we are not constantly challenged, we will stagnate instead of grow. With that being said, we are going to focus on stretching in Lesson 5.

## **Stretching Principles**

There are some basic stretching principles that exist to help us understand the benefit of continually reaching just a bit outside of our comfort zones. These principles apply to all areas – physical, mental and spiritual.

**Principle #1:** The more flexible you are, the less chance of injury.

Athletes having a regular stretching routine are less likely to suffer injury. Individuals making a regular habit of stretching just a bit outside their comfort zones in various areas of life including work, personal and spiritual realms, are better able to be flexible during times of busyness and more than normal stress. "Having broad shoulders" is a good way to describe being flexible because it means that a person is able to handle what life throws at him/her without crumbling quickly under the pressure. Note that the principle says "less chance of injury" and not "eliminates injury." Although it is different for everyone, each person has a point where he/she need to slow down and rest. Being flexible simply keeps a breaking point from showing itself as severely as it would otherwise, and it also allows more opportunity for times of retreat and healing which can further serve to prevent injury.

1. Do a self-assessment on your flexibility. How flexible do you feel physically? What about mentally? Do you get easily irritated, or are you able to quickly adjust to the changes life throws at you? How is your mental state? Are you able to think clearly when needed, or do you struggle coming up with solutions or new ideas? Take notes on your personal assessment, and keep them in mind throughout the rest of this study.

**Principle #2:** Stretching comes naturally to all of us. Don't fight it.

We all can recall that feeling of waking up after a good night's sleep and feeling the sudden urge for a whole-body stretch before getting out of bed. Or, what about that irrepressible yawn that

hits, usually at the most inconvenient time? Our body has built-in stretching needs, and who are we to fight those? Scientists don't know exactly why we yawn, but one theory suggests that it stretches the lungs and the lung tissue. What we know for sure is that sometimes we just can't help it, and yawns are contagious. Unlike yawns, scientists do know why we need to stretch when we wake up in the morning. When our muscles are inactive, blood has a harder time moving through the capillaries, which means less oxygen is getting to the various parts of our bodies. This also means that waste is not being carried away by our blood. So, since our muscles are oxygen-starved when we wake up in the morning, since we have extra waste that needs moved out by our blood, and because our brain needs a blood pressure increase to get ready to tackle the day, we need a good stretch for all of that to happen. No wonder we feel more ready to face the day after having a good stretch in the morning! God new what he was doing when he created our bodies, so don't fight a good stretch when the urge hits! This concept easily applies to all areas of life. When we feel restless or bored, perhaps it's our minds and bodies telling us we need a good stretch.

2. Make a full-body stretch a habit each morning when you wake up. Feel every muscle in your body stretch before you get out of bed. This should only take a minute or two, but it can help your day get off to a great start.

**Principle #3:** Stretching takes you out of your comfort zone and opens doors to new opportunities and possibilities.

When a body is stiff and inflexible, stretching is uncomfortable and sometimes a bit painful. But a daily routine of stretching can change all that. With small steps taken over time (sound familiar?) a body can change from a stiff, creaky system to one that moves more easily and with less pain. While stretching may feel uncomfortable at first, and it may even be discouraging if there's a severe lack of flexibility, doing a little stretching every day will produce tremendous results in a relatively short period of time.

For example, one woman had been experiencing severe pain, tingling, numbness and burning in her ankles and feet, so much so that she had to cease exercising, which was a bit part of her life. Many small things helped, including special padding on her feet, wearing only running shoes, and rest from impact exercises, but she just could not seem to make progress that helped her feel like she was finally healing from the various entrapment syndromes that plagued her. One day, she was told that her calves were tight and that this might be contributing to the severity of her foot problems, so she incorporated three calf-stretching exercises into her daily routine. Within a week, significant progress had been made, and the woman now feels like she may be on the road to being as active as she once was. Stretching took this woman from feeling defeated to feeling like she was conquering what was once defeating her.

This woman's victory can be carried into the mental and physical realms as well. By doing something daily that pushes outside of your comfort zone, you can increase your ability to do just

about any task. While none of us may become as flexible as a gymnast or geniuses like Einstein, we can all be at least a little more flexible mentally and physically in the near future than we are today.

3. What is one area – physical, mental or spiritual – where you feel inflexible? Spend time in prayer asking God to show you how to become more flexible in that area.

**Principle #4:** Stretching (and conversely tension) is one of your body's [kinetic chains](#).

Stretching will impact every area of life. From increasing the blood flow through the body, to creating a more oxygen rich state, to allowing for the flexibility needed to handle everyday wear and tear, stretching beyond our comfort zones will serve to improve every other area of life. Stretching mentally will allow for a person to not only handle tough tasks requiring a lot of thinking but to also better handle the myriad of decisions that most people face on a daily basis. Stretching in the spiritual sense means going beyond the basics of daily Bible reading, regular prayer and fellowship with the body of Christ. It means being open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and allowing for the opportunities of God to shape your day.

God will often ask us to step outside our comfort zone, but He generally doesn't make us leap outside it all at once. The Holy Spirit is a gentleman and will guide us into new levels of service, gratitude and praise if we simply remain willing to follow His lead. If we do so, we will one day look back and discover that He has shaped us into an image more like that of Christ, and as a result we find our lives walking more directly toward sanctification and holiness.

4. Now take a minute to evaluate your comfort zones. Take time to ask God which ones need stretched, and then take a few minutes to just sit and listen to what the Holy Spirit might be telling you.

**Principle #5:** Setting stretching goals brings immense, whole-system benefits.

Anyone who has written goals down and stuck with the process of following through realizes the tremendous benefits doing so entails. Stretching – whether physical, mental or spiritual – can have goals that allow a person to gradually increase the size of his/her comfort zone. This process, when done in small steps that add up to huge gain in the long run, plays a big part in living a deliberate and intentional life. This means life is no longer happening to you, but you are doing your part in living a life filled with the blessings of God.

5. Consider where you can set a stretching goal. Do you have a problem area in your body that might benefit from daily stretches? Do you have a specific skill you would like to learn to make your job easier? Maybe you want to be more outgoing in church services by raising your hands during praise and worship or even praising God in an audible voice? Pick one goal that you can set that will get you to step outside of your comfort zone.

## **Physical Stretching**

Physical stretching, much like hydrating and proper breathing, can have enormous health benefits if done regularly and properly. Muscles tighten and range of motion is minimized as aging occurs, but a regular stretching routine can help lengthen muscles and restore range of motion. Whether you exercise or not, stretching should be a part of your daily routine. According to the Mayo Clinic, the top five benefits of stretching are:

1. **Increased flexibility and joint range of motion:** *Daily performance improves when you increase your flexibility – lifting packages, running to catch the bus because easier and less tiring.*
2. **Improved circulation:** *When you stretch it increases blood flow, nourishing the muscle tissue and flushing out any waste byproducts in the muscle tissue. Improved circulation also reduces the recovery time if you have any muscle injuries.*
3. **Better posture:** *Frequent stretching helps reduce tightness in your muscles, allowing you to maintain better posture.*
4. **Relief from stress:** *Muscles tend to tense up as a result of being stress – stretching helps to ease that tension.*
5. **Enhanced coordination:** *Stretching helps to keep a full range of motion through your joints because it loosens stiff muscles, which helps give you better balance.*

Additional health benefits of stretching include increased energy levels, pain relief and a greater sense of well-being.

6. What one benefit would you most like to gain from a regular stretching routine?

As with any type of stretching, there are some basic rules to follow in order to avoid injury. Follow these basic rules when incorporating stretching into your routine:

- Make sure muscles are warmed up before stretching. Start with gentle movements before moving on to stretches that push your comfort zone.
  - Walk around for several minutes after rising from bed or jog in place for two to three minutes to warm up the muscles before stretching.
  - Gradually stretch each muscle slowly (no bouncing or acceleration) and hold the stretch for 10 to 20 seconds.
  - Stretch to a comfortable range of motion and do not exceed that range until you feel you are becoming more flexible after several days of stretching. Stop immediately if there is discomfort.
  - Inhale and exhale regularly as you stretch – never hold your breath, and try to concentrate on the muscle you are stretching and feel the stretch without rushing. (Please see Lesson 4: Breathing to learn more about the importance of proper breathing.)
  - Set aside five to 10 minutes to stretch anytime during the day.
7. Where can you fit 10 minutes of stretching into your day? Before you say, “I don’t have an extra 10 minutes,” Keep in mind that these 10 minutes will probably increase your efficiency and allow you to accomplish more with your day.

## **Mental Stretching**

Everyone is familiar with mental stretching. That's what we all did so naturally in school, so much so that we didn't really even consider it stretching most of the time. No matter how good (or bad) of a student you were/are, simply being present in the classroom resulted in some level of stretching most of the time. Unfortunately, once we graduate and enter the workforce, we often stop stretching mentally. This usually happens after we get comfortable in our jobs and know enough to do them at least fairly well. Comfort, unfortunately, is quite often the breeding ground for stagnation.

A flexible mind, which is the result of mental stretching, is one that is able to shift course when necessary or useful without a breakdown or even a significant delay. A flexible mind is also one that is not overly attached to things going as planned and is willing and able to take events in stride and adapt as needed. A person with a flexible mind is more able to take advantage of opportunities, situations and experiences for which one cannot plan. In short, a flexible mind allows for adapting to our ever-changing external environment in a way that allows us to not only enjoy but to flourish in the process. The opposite of a flexible mind is one that is rigid or stuck in ways that limit a person's ability to move positively through life and to experience growth. If you find yourself easily frustrated and annoyed, consider that you might be suffering from an inflexible mind.

8. Henry David Thoreau in "Walden" said, *"Be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought."* What are new channels of thought (topics, activities, ideas, etc.) that you have left unexplored in your life that perhaps you can now pursue?

Simple ways to stretch your mind include changing your route to/from work, changing your exercise routine, rearranging your furniture and redecorating. An example of a person who truly took mind stretching seriously is an individual who decided one day to teach herself to write left handed even though she was right handed. She succeeded in doing so in a legible manner too!

Work simple ways of stretching your mind into your day, realizing that any little stretch will be of benefit and that small stretches made on a regular basis will result in long-term positive results. Some examples of incorporating stretching into your day include trying to fix a misspelled word before consulting spell check, doing the math in your head or on paper instead of using a calculator, and changing your morning routine. These small changes will spark new patterns of thought in your brain resulting in new and fresh ideas. Really!

Another way to stretch mentally is to use what Richard Carlson in "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff" calls the "back burner." The back burner is a place where you put thoughts, ideas, problems, etc. to which you don't have a solution or a direction. You sort of let them simmer like you would a good pot of soup. Over time, the ingredients meld together and produce a soup that is more delicious than it would be if it were not allowed to simmer. This practice requires patience. It requires that we don't have to come up with a solution or action or "to do" item right away. It allows for the Holy Spirit to work in us to develop, give

ideas and provide solutions. So often, we jump into action without letting something simmer, and the result is a less-than-desirable outcome. Try using your back burner as a mind-stretching practice.

9. What challenge are you currently facing that you might be able to place on your back burner? Deliberately place it there and refuse to take any significant action for a specific period of time, unless of course the ideas just start coming like a waterfall... write those down!

Dr. Marion Diamond, renowned brain researcher, says that research on the physical results of thinking has shown that just using the brain actually increases the number of dendritic branches that interconnect brain cells. In other words, the more we think, the better our brains function – regardless of age. Dr. Diamond found that whether we are young or old, we can continue to learn. The brain can change at any age. A dendrite grows much like a tree – from trunk to limbs to branches to twigs – in an array of ever finer complexity. In fact, older brains may have an advantage. She discovered that more highly developed neurons respond even better to intellectual enrichment than less developed ones do. The greatest increase in dendritic length occurred in the outermost dendritic branches, as a reaction to new information. What does all this mean in the context of this Bible study? The more mental stretching we do, the more our brains will grow and be able to handle more information. The great part of this is that as we age, we are actually better able to learn and handle new information.

Just like with the amoeba, humans are happier when they are challenged or stretched as long as they are able to make progress. However, being challenged or stretched too much in any area can cause injury, damage and major setback. Balance is key. We must stretch to the point of feeling the stretch and know we are growing but not to the point of feeling pain. In other words, stretch and challenge yourself but don't do so to the point of chaos in your life. Routines and habits give us needed structure. Too many of them, and we atrophy, but too few of them, and chaos results.

### **Spiritual Stretching**

One of the best Biblical examples of spiritual stretching is found in the life of Moses. Taking a look at the life of Moses will help us see how God can gently stretch a person as he/she follows the will of the Heavenly Father. First, let's take a look at who Moses was before his encounter with God in the burning bush:

10. What does Exodus 2:1-10 tell us about Moses' childhood?

We see from this portion of scripture that Moses was born into an adverse situation, and he was raised as an Egyptian. We can surmise from the fact that he was raised as an Egyptian that he received the best education and, according to tradition, would have been taught how to be a military leader. He may have even been in line to be Pharaoh one day.

11. What does Exodus 2:11-15 tell us about Moses' focus?

Moses was aware of the *"hard labors"* of the Hebrews, which he considered to be *"one of his brethren."* So, even though Moses was raised as Egyptian royalty, he still identified himself with his Jewish blood

line. Moses eventually takes his frustration out on an Egyptian, who he murders and buries in the sand. Scripture tells us that Moses “*looked this way and that.*” Significantly, Moses did not look up. He relies on himself and not on God, showing that his focus is lateral and not vertical.

12. What happens to Moses in the next 40 years of his life according to Exodus 2:15-25?

Moses goes from being a prince of Egypt to a lowly shepherd. He also marries during this time, has two sons, and develops a friendship with his father-in-law, which comes into play later in Moses’ life in a significant way.

13. What type of training do you suppose Moses underwent during his 40 years as a shepherd? See 1 Samuel 17:34-35, Psalm 23, Isaiah 40:11, Jeremiah 33:13, and Luke 2:8 and list the various tasks performed by shepherds in the Bible.

While the Bible is silent on exactly what happens during this time in Moses’ life, we know at the end of it that God felt Moses was ready to stretch beyond his comfort zone. During that 40 year period of being a shepherd, Moses was perhaps stretched in humility. He had royal comforts in Egypt and very little as a shepherd. He went from being around others to be alone most of the time. Moses’ training as a shepherd is what God used to prepare him to be a shepherd to 600,000 Jews (This is just the number of men. Women and children were not in this count.) in their trek out of Egypt and to the Promised Land.

While Moses may have possessed the leadership skills to lead the Jews out of Egypt, he still lacked one essential quality that he had yet to overcome. Once again, God would stretch him to a new level.

14. What essential quality did Moses lack when God first called him to confront Pharaoh and ask him to let the Jews go? See Exodus 3:11 & 13 and 4:1, 10 & 13. (Note: Reading Exodus 3 & 4 in their entirety would be very helpful to grasp the context in which these verses are taking place.)

In each of these verses, we clearly see that Moses had a confidence problem. He was looking to his own abilities and saw that they were lacking for the task given to him by God. But, if you read Exodus 3 and 4, you know that for each excuse Moses came up with God countered with a solution. No matter what Moses said, he could not get away from the call of God. God knew Moses had the ability to be the leader He was calling him to be, so He equipped Moses and allowed the stretching to begin.

One of the main ways that God equips us as we stretch and grow is through other people, and two significant examples of this stand out in the life of Moses. One such example is when God sent Aaron, Moses’ brother, to do the actually speaking to Pharaoh because Moses didn’t believe he was capable. A second example is found in Moses’ interactions with his father-in-law Jethro.

15. Read Exodus 18. How did Jethro help Moses? What was Moses’ response to Jethro’s advice?

Jethro gave Moses invaluable advice on the benefits of delegating, and he also provided specific instructions on how to carry this advice out. Moses took Jethro’s advice, and the benefits of his doing so were significant. Moses was now using a sustainable strategy (18:23), there were fewer conflicts because

more needs were being met (18:23), leaders were developed (18:25, 26), and Moses was better able to fulfill his calling (18:26). This story of Moses and Jethro provides a great example as we each seek to stretch spiritually, because it shows us that not only are we not alone in our quests to stretch and grow but also that God will often send others to help us in our journeys. To that end, we can make a point to look for the ways God might be equipping us through others.

Most of us know the story of the plagues (Exodus 5-12), the Red Sea (Exodus 13) and the Jews flight into the dessert as well as their occupation of the Promised Land (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua). Throughout his life and up until when Moses died, we see the culmination of God's stretching Moses as he becomes a leader to the Israelites. Moses went from a humble shepherd with no confidence to the leader of a liberated nation, and this happened only because God stretched Moses beyond what Moses thought he was capable of accomplishing.

16. What was Moses able to accomplish, and how he was described when he finally submitted to God and allowed his comfort zone to be stretched? See Exodus 32:34 & 33:12-23; Numbers 12:3.

Moses not only led over 600,000 people out of Egypt and through the dessert for 40 years, he was also allowed to plead and bargain with God, find favor with God and even see the Lord pass in front of him. He went from being someone the Israelites questioned constantly to becoming known as *"very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth."* Needless to say, Moses developed a solid reputation over many years, and it did not include low self-esteem and lack of confidence. Over the course of time, God stretched Moses and made him into a humbly and holy man of God. He can do the same for each of us too.

In the New Testament, we find many examples of stretching in the miracles Jesus performed. While these examples happened literally, each person had to actually reach out his/her hand, these acts also represent a spiritual stretching as well. Jesus could have simply healed these people without them having done anything. He could have healed them without even being in the same location. But, He seemed to want them to reach out in faith and take some part in the miracle He was performing at the time. He wants no different from us. Jesus still wants us to reach out for Him and to participate in miracles.

17. Read Matthew 12:13 and note what happened with a simple act of stretching.

Okay, so this is not exactly the type of physical stretching we've been talking about so far, but let's stick with this story for just a minute. First, the man's act of stretching out his hand as instructed by Jesus gave evidence of the miracle. Second, the Pharisees watching this miracle were unable to stretch beyond their dogmatic and religious ways of thinking to understand what Jesus was trying to teach. When it comes to stretching spiritually, a small act of reaching toward Jesus can produce amazing results. Likewise, resistance to letting him stretch us spiritually can produce *"hard hearts."* (See Matthew 13:10-23)

Remember that Moses did not change from a man who lacked confidence and self-esteem to a humble and Holy man of God overnight. Years of stretching made him into the person God wanted him to be. The same is true for us. Simple obedience to the voice of the Holy Spirit in our lives can allow us to stretch and grow and to become more like Jesus. This won't happen overnight; we must face years of small acts of stretching just like Moses did.

18. What does David have to say about stretching in Psalm 143:6?

David was feeling hopeless and depressed, but his prayers fit into what he knew was consistent with God's character and plans. In that knowledge, he "*stretched*" toward God. It's this act of reaching toward God, whether through raising our hands in worship or letting our hearts and minds be "*renewed*" by His word, that allows us to stretch spiritually.

19. Write out Romans 12:2, II Corinthians 4:16, Ephesians 4:23, Colossians 3:10 and Titus 3:5. Pray over these verses focusing on how God works to renew our hearts and minds. Consider the part that this renewal plays in us being spiritually stretched.

The results of this renewal (stretching) process include knowing the will of God, we keep from losing heart, our minds are refreshed, we receive a new self in the image of our Creator, and we receiving a washing and regenerating that simply sounds invigorating. Spiritual stretching brings enormous benefits, even beyond those of stretching physically and mentally. These verses are an encouraging and motivating look at how allowing ourselves to be stretched can change our lives. Be a part of the process. Reach out your hand toward Jesus!

### **Small Change Steps**

*"A small daily task, if it really be daily, will beat the labours of a spasmodic Hercules."*

(Anthony Trollope, Victorian Era English Novelist)

- 1.) Visit [http://www.sparkpeople.com/resource/fitness\\_articles.asp?id=1261](http://www.sparkpeople.com/resource/fitness_articles.asp?id=1261) and choose one or two stretches to incorporate into your daily routine.
- 2.) Do a web search on stretches that can help a specific problem area you might have. For example, find stretches that can aid in reducing lower back pain or relieve neck tension while at work.
- 3.) Set a mental stretching goal. What small act of mental stretching can you incorporate into your day? Check out <http://www.brainmetrix.com/> for ideas.
- 4.) Set a spiritual stretching goal. This could be a new Bible study or additional time in prayer. Let the Holy Spirit lead you to the stretching Jesus knows you need.
- 5.) Share at least one of your goals with someone else, and let yourself be accountable. Consider asking that person for advice on how you might reach your goals.
- 6.) Investigate [www.dailyfeats.com](http://www.dailyfeats.com) and consider tracking daily feats that you accomplish. Further consider creating a team with whom you can set a larger goal to work toward together.

- 7.) Check out the web site [www.happinessprojecttoolbox.com](http://www.happinessprojecttoolbox.com) and consider your own current level of happiness. Find suggestions for becoming a happier person.
- 8.) View the videos [www.theyearsareshort.com](http://www.theyearsareshort.com) and [www.secretsof adulthood.com](http://www.secretsof adulthood.com) to help give you another person's perspective on viewing life.
- 9.) Check out the web site [www.40by40.weebly.com](http://www.40by40.weebly.com) as an example of how someone else is trying to stretch in all areas of her life.
- 10.) Find a book that is outside of your normal reading choices and commit to giving it at least 50 pages before you decide whether or not to stop or continue reading.