



Summer Lovin' Devotions

Week Seven

July 23-29, 2017



Mountains

As you begin each day: Take some deep breaths and acknowledge that you are in God's presence. As you read, pay attention not just with your mind, but also with your heart. Are there words or phrases that stick out to you? If yes, take time to consider them. Carry the words with you throughout the day and let God continue to work with you on what has been brought to your attention. If you get distracted as you read, that is okay. Use the distractions as a reminder to thank God for those happy distractions and as a reminder to give to God those troubling distractions.

All scripture is from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Day 1 - Be prepared

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might deny ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king that the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him, but his power and his wrath are against all who forsake him. So we fasted and petitioned our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.
-Ezra 8:21-23

If you're going to climb a mountain, you need to prepare for the climb. If it's particularly strenuous, you should prepare months or years in advance to be in shape. And even if it's not particularly strenuous, climbers still need to prepare by taking water, food, good shoes, extra clothes, a walking stick, and a map. Proper preparation may prevent peril.

The book of Ezra is a history book in the Old Testament that, together with Nehemiah, tells the story of the Israelites returning from exile in Babylon to their land and rebuilding the temple and themselves as the people of God. Here in chapter 8, Ezra has been describing all of the people and all of the possessions that were returning. They were prepared with all of their physical stuff: they had lots of people, grain, livestock, gold and silver. Ezra called them to prepare spiritually too. He called them to fast and to pray for a safe journey. He called them to trust God to answer their prayer.

What do you take out the door with you when you're going somewhere? Maybe car keys, your wallet, phone, lunch box, water bottle or coffee cup. We all prepare stuff when we are heading somewhere. What about spiritual preparation? How do you prepare spiritually each day? When you are gathering your things to walk out the door, do you have a way that you acknowledge God and ask for blessing? Would it make a difference in your day if you paused to place your trust in God?

Prayer: O God, our protector, thank you for the wisdom you give to us to prepare our possessions. Let us not place so much trust in our stuff and in ourselves that we neglect to trust you. As we go out the door, remind us to turn our minds toward you and acknowledge that all we have comes from you and all we do is for you. Amen.

Day 2 - Leaving your comfort zone

Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.
-Esther 4:13-17

Often times on a hike, or on any type of journey, travelers have to go outside their comfort zones. Maybe it’s taking a more difficult trail, walking through tall vegetation or deep mud, trusting someone in a different way, or going on a hike alone.

The story of Esther is a story of bravery. It’s fairly brief, only 10 chapters, and not for the faint of heart, but it’s worth the time to read. The very existence of the Israelites as a people was being threatened. In this context, a Jewish woman, Esther, came to be queen. Here in chapter 4 we see her determine to take courageous action to save her people. It is clear to readers that Esther had to go well outside her comfort zone. She didn’t go alone. Although the book of Esther in most protestant Bibles doesn’t mention God, Esther does tell her Uncle Mordecai to gather her people for a fast, an indication of her faith in God. She doesn’t assume she knows how God will act, “if I perish, I perish.” Yet, she evaluates her circumstance, understand her call, and leaves herself in God’s hands because God is faithful.

The Bible is filled with “I Will” statements. In part repeating the blessing of creation from Genesis 1, God said to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that *I will* show you. *I will* make of you a great nation, and *I will* bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:1-2, *emphasis added*). The Lord said to Joshua, “This day *I will* begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that *I will* be with you as I was with Moses” (Joshua 3:7, *emphasis added*). And he said to them, “Follow me, and *I will* make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19, *emphasis added*). “But those who drink of the

water that *I will* give them will never be thirsty. The water that *I will* give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14, *emphasis added*).

We are not called to do the work that God will do. But, we are called to do something; God uses us each, afterall. What did God put you *here* for, at *this* time? We are each to listen and to look, to ask and to obey. What might God be calling you to today? How will you respond? Do you see injustice, like Esther did? Are you in a place to help?

Prayer: God, thank you for the promise that you will take care of us. Thank you for blessing all of creation with your love and care and purpose. May your Holy Spirit guard and guide us today that we may be an example of you love, beauty, justice, and holiness in the world. Amen.

Day 3 - Real Beauty

Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight. -1 Peter 3:3-4

One of the best things about being outside is observing the beauty and the variety of the created world. Hiking toward a summit is a journey with a specific goal. The cool and breezy atmosphere on the top of a mountain is not the same as in the valley, and the view from up top is completely different too. It can be tempting to be in a hurry to get to the end of the journey, but one who hurries misses the beauty on the way: the unique flowers, the trickle of a tiny stream, the call of birds, the tracks of animal, and the quiet work taking place within. Those who enjoy the journey will say: don't be in a hurry!

Our spiritual journeys are similar. It's good to slow down on the way to where we are going to see where we've been and to appreciate where we are. There is beauty all along the way.

This nugget from 1 Peter is reminding us of the beauty that develops within. It is written to women, but it's truth applies to us all. In context and in specifics (ie: don't wear jewelry), the verse sounds demeaning and legalistic to modern ears (because it is), but the spirit of the instruction is worthy. Read it in context of the whole Bible, remembering that Esther,

from yesterday, was 180° turnabout from the specifics in this scripture from 1 Peter. There's no doubt she wore jewelry, makeup, and perfume.

What does lasting beauty look like? Is it always gentle and quiet? Can beauty be loud? Can it be demanding? Jesus cleared the temple (Mark 11:15-17), Jesus demanded sacrifice and obedience (Luke 18:21-23); is that gentle or quiet? Perhaps lasting beauty isn't always gentle and quiet behavior, but rather a gentle and quiet *spirit*. Maybe lasting beauty is when, with God's help, we learn to quiet our hearts and listen, to mute the chatter and noise that seems constant. Maybe lasting beauty is learning to be gentle in our hearts, being filled with pure love that comes from God. This beauty is not as easy to wear as earrings, it's not sold at a cosmetics counter or at Men's Warehouse. This beauty comes from Christ. Psalm 27:4 says, *"One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple."* This is real beauty.

How do you make yourself look good on the outside? How often do you check the mirror? Do you consider how you look on the inside? When have you had a quiet or gentle spirit? What can you do in the next few moments to cultivate your inner beauty? In the next few days?

Prayer: God, at times we notice your beauty all around us. We see it when we look to our left and our right, when we look up and look down, both before us and behind us. At other times, we see a mess. The same is true when we look inside. Remind us of your grace as we look at both the world outside and within. Help us grow toward you in both. Amen.

Day 4 - Take time to rest

David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I pursue this band? Shall I overtake them?" He answered him, "Pursue; for you shall surely overtake and shall surely rescue." So David set out, he and the six hundred men who were with him. They came to the Wadi Besor, where those stayed who were left behind. But David went on with the pursuit, he and four hundred men; two hundred stayed behind, too exhausted to cross the Wadi Besor. In the open country they found an Egyptian, and brought him to David. They gave him bread and he ate; they gave him water to drink; they also gave him a piece of fig cake and two clusters of raisins. When he had eaten, his spirit revived; for he had not eaten bread or

drunk water for three days and three nights. Then David said to him, "To whom do you belong? Where are you from?" He said, "I am a young man of Egypt, servant to an Amalekite. My master left me behind because I fell sick three days ago....

David came to the two hundred men who had been too exhausted to follow David, and who had been left at the Wadi Besor. They went out to meet David and to meet the people who were with him. When David drew near to the people he saluted them. Then all the corrupt and worthless fellows among the men who had gone with David said, "Because they did not go with us, we will not give them any of the spoil that we have recovered, except that each man may take his wife and children, and leave." But David said, "You shall not do so, my brothers, with what the Lord has given us; he has preserved us and handed over to us the raiding party that attacked us. Who would listen to you in this matter? For the share of the one who goes down into the battle shall be the same as the share of the one who stays by the baggage; they shall share alike."

-1 Samuel 30:8-13, 21-24

Doing hard work requires energy. To work well, you need to eat well, drink plenty, and take time to rest. To endure a long journey up a mountain, along a hot path, or through difficult terrain, you have to take care of yourself. We need to stop and rest along the way.

In this scripture, King David was acting in his role as tribal warrior and after consulting God, determined to go after some people who had taken wives and other property. They'd been in battle already, and some of his fighters were too tired to make the trip so they stayed behind. Those who went on found a servant who had fallen ill and was then abandoned. They gave him food and water and he helped them with information to win the battle (read the whole story to know more). Although he was tired and sick, he had a purpose. When they got back David insisted that those who stayed to rest were as important as those who fought and gave them the same reward.

Emotional and spiritual work is as taxing as physical work. Working through pain and grief, wrestling with our understanding of God, setting goals and evaluating our circumstances all requires energy. Emotional and spiritual food and drink are necessary. Just as people vary when it comes to their favorite regular foods, people vary when it comes to their most nourishing spiritual and emotional food too. Yes, there are staples of worship, prayer, and scripture, but beyond that diet we can connect with God through creating music or art or crafts; others through conversation

or silence; others through activity like walks, bike rides, horseback riding, or writing.

We all need physical, spiritual, and emotional rest. As King David knew, we are valuable when we rest. Do you feel as valuable when resting as when working? What is your favorite spiritual and emotional food? Are you starving yourself? When was the last time you had adequate physical rest? How can you encourage someone else to care for themselves today?

Prayer: God, you never sleep or slumber, you are always “on”, but you didn’t create us like that. Teach us to care for ourselves: body and soul. In the next few moments, let me rest in you.....Amen.

Day 5 - Keep moving forward

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” -Luke 9:51-62

Most long journeys have at least one time when it is tempting to quit. It gets tiring or boring and we just want to be done. Maybe it’s one of those long uphill on a bike ride where we just can’t pedal another turn. It take a deep level of commitment, or sometimes necessity, to keep going, even walking the bike if that’s the only way. Regardless, it requires grit. Grit is defined as “a positive, non-cognitive trait based on an individual's passion for a particular long-term goal or end state, coupled with a powerful motivation to achieve their respective objective”¹. Grit causes us to keep moving forward even when the road is tough.

Jesus is described as demonstrating grit through the phrase “set his face to

Jerusalem". He had turned his attention toward the goal: sacrificing himself on the cross for the redemption of the world. Some people weren't eager to follow, but he went on anyway. His disciples asked if they should be like Elijah and call down fire from heaven (9:54), but Jesus said no. He'd already told them to just to shake the dust from their feet and leave those who wouldn't follow (9:3-5). His call to followers is difficult: leave home and take up a new life, don't just return to the old "plow" (9:62) way of doing your life. It's difficult, but it's not a call he wasn't committed to himself. He took on a whole new life too.

When the going is tough spiritually, we can depend on more than just grit. We can depend on the Holy Spirit who lives within us. With the Psalmist we can pray, *"Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I; for you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy"* (Psalm 61:1-2).

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for the example of being focused, of moving toward the goal, even when it was difficult. Teach us to do the same. Develop a holy perseverance within us. Be our strength. Amen.

¹ Wikipedia. *Grit: Personality Trait*. Retrieved July 21, 2017 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grit_\(personality_trait\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grit_(personality_trait)).