



Summer Lovin' Devotions

Week Eight

July 30-Aug 5, 2017



We Gather Together

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—Family reunions

The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, God's Son, happened just as it was written about in the prophecy of Isaiah: Look, I am sending my messenger before you. He will prepare your way, a voice shouting in the wilderness: "Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight." John the Baptist was in the wilderness calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. Everyone in Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to the Jordan River and were being baptized by John as they confessed their sins. John wore clothes made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He announced, "One stronger than I am is coming after me. I'm not even worthy to bend over and loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." -Mark 1:1-8, Common English Bible

A fairly common gathering of people is the family reunion. Sometimes family reunions are looked forward to with great anticipation and other times with great trepidation. We often look forward to seeing some of our favorite aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins. Sometimes we wonder how a couple of the cousins will get along, and we pray that things will go smoothly.

In most families there is a person who is considered a little bit of an oddball. If you can't identify one in your family, then it's probably you, and that's okay, or maybe you're all just oddballs. If John the Baptist's family was having a reunion, John would be that weird uncle. He meandered around the wilderness wearing hairy clothes and eating bugs. He dressed like a famous guy from centuries before, the prophet Elijah, who was famous for not dying, but being swept to heaven fully alive (2 Kings 2).

John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus. He called "people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins". He asked people to pay attention to how they were living and to pay attention to the One who would be coming soon. He was waking his culture up so they wouldn't miss what was going to take place with Jesus.

I wonder how many people missed what John was saying because he was odd? On the flip side, how many listened because he was different and because he was like Elijah? How often do you ignore the words of people you think are odd? Could they have something important to say? How comfortable are you in your own way of life? Are you awake to see what's going on with Jesus in the our world?

Prayer: God, we thank you for those you have put in our lives to prepare the way for us to experience Jesus. We thank you for variety in creation and especially within the human race. You truly are more magnificent and imaginative than we can wrap our heads around. Keep us from being so comfortable that we sleep through what you are doing in your world today. Use us to prepare the way for others to experience you. Amen.

Day 2—Church meetings—Seeing our purpose

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him. -Romans 12:1-5, The Message

Probably almost every day of the week people gather together at churches for meetings. At their best, these groups of people are diverse and work together well. Groups gather to plan worship, care for buildings, plan activities for youth and children, oversee the business of the church, and many other projects. Serving in one of these groups is a way that people offer themselves to God.

This scripture says it simply: “embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do”. We often think that our work for God is something we give, and it is, but it is more. Our work for God is God's gift to us. By grace, the lives that we give, our time, energy, and passions, are used by God to bring us to maturity. This truth is stated simply, but it's not lived simply. We require frequent reminders that we are working for God because God has given us gifts and ministry. When we forget, our focus is turned to who we are and what we do. This causes us to forget the purpose of ministry, and think our work is about our own desires and feelings of usefulness. It's not. Our work is used by God to develop community, the body of Christ. It's through God's work in us that God brings us to understanding of his love for us all and design for the world.

What would happen if you saw the work you do, all of it - at home, work, school, church, etc - as work given by God to develop “well-formed maturity in you”? Do you tend to think of your activity as “what you do for God” or as “what God is doing for you”? How does your tendency affect your vision of what should be done in your work? How does it affect how you see those you work with?

Prayer: We often get it backward don't we, God? We are sorry for thinking of our great gifts to you more than we think of your great gifts to us. Thank you for forgiving us and for carrying us through to maturity. We also give thanks for those we work with who are used to show us your grace. Help us submit to your way even when it challenges us. Lead us to be like you, Jesus. Amen.

Day 3—Remembering who we are

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; ...[and he] opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.... [The leaders] helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. -Nehemiah 8:1-12

The Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Israelites returned from exile. The process wasn't easy: rebuilding the temple, rebuilding the wall that surrounded the city, and rebuilding themselves as God's covenant people. The priests saw that they'd neglected God and led the people in repentance (Ezra 8-10) and rebuilding. After a century or so of work, they were finally done...or rather, they were finally able to begin.

The leaders called the people together to celebrate. It would be the longest celebration recorded in the Bible, maybe around a year and a half, in celebration of God. This part of the story starts in Nehemiah 8 and the leaders start it off with a reading of scripture, with interpretation and then feasting. We would call it a sermon and pot-luck. Many of the Israelites had never heard the scriptures before and they hadn't worshipped at the temple before, so it was new and fresh.

Imagine being among them and having your priest, Ezra, stand above you and open the scroll. Imagine standing with your community and hearing the commandments for the first time and "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God,*

the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart" (Deuteronomy 6:4-6). Imagine yourself knowing something of this God, who has been credited with freeing your people from captivity, but just hearing for the first time how to worship. Perhaps you'd done work on the temple, or on the wall, but now that work was done and you were hearing God speak for the first time. How would you respond? The people wept. Why? Maybe from sorrow for not keeping the Law? Maybe because of fear? Maybe because of the overwhelming nature of God's presence?

In the midst of this weeping, Ezra and the other leaders taught an important truth: the joy of the Lord is our strength. They taught the people to turn from sadness to joy! They had repented, they had rededicated, and now they were to rejoice - to have joy again! On this holy day of new beginnings, they learned to eat and drink and to share with others so everyone could rejoice in the Lord.

We are called to do the same. There is something beautiful in their ability to respond to God's law and love with fresh hearts. Our hearts are often calloused. We've heard it all before. We fail to repent because our sin doesn't seem too serious; we fail to rejoice because the Good News doesn't seem too extravagant. Oh to hear with fresh hearts like the Israelites did.

In what way(s) is God asking you to respond with a fresh heart today?

Prayer: God, thank you for the times you remind us to pause and reflect on how amazing you are. Teach us to respond to your call with a fresh heart. Amen.

Day 4—Community Broken

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him,

"Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." -Genesis 3:1-12

The entire narrative of the Bible, the story of God and our story with God, is about God being with us. God creates community. From the beginning, in all of the symbolism and imagery of Genesis, we see that God dwelled with people. God walked in the paradise with them. God is community.

One day Eve and Adam were tempted by the serpent and made some bad choices. And then, because of their sin, they became afraid and hid from God. Fear is a powerful force. It can break community. It does break community. Here fear broke community between Adam and Eve and God, and it broke community between Adam and Eve. Adam quickly blamed Eve for the violation *"the woman...gave me the fruit"*. This story remind us to be careful how we act when we are afraid. The Psalmist teaches us a better way, *"O Most High, when I am afraid, I put my trust in you"* (Psalm 58:3). When we are afraid, we can take our fear to God and receive protection. When we sin, we can take our sin to God and receive forgiveness. Going to God, allowing God to gather us in, roots us in the community that God is creating.

In what ways do you allow sin to separate you from God? When things go wrong, and you are afraid, do you blame other people or do you turn to God?

Prayer: Emmanuel, God with us, conquer our fear, teach us to trust you and turn to you when we are afraid. Forgive our sin. "Help us stop hiding our brokenness as a curse that causes bitterness and instead befriend it as a gift that moves us toward you."¹ Give us grace to be bold in seeking unity, even when we are afraid. Amen.

Day 5—Siblings in Christ

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. -Philemon 8-16

Philemon is a brief book of the Bible, just one chapter, 25 verses long; it fits

on a single page, and ⅓ of it is printed here. It's a personal letter written by Paul to Philemon, who was the owner of a slave named Onesimus. For some reason, Onesimus came to be with Paul while he was in prison. Maybe he ran away after doing something wrong and went to appeal to Paul, as could have been part of custom. Or, maybe he was loaned by Philemon to Paul while he was in prison. Or maybe by some other way. Regardless, while they were together, Paul came to look at Onesimus as a special son in the faith and requests - very firmly! - that Philemon see him as a brother.

Although the letter was written to Philemon, it includes public greetings, indicating that it was to be read to the community as well. Philemon would have certainly felt the pressure to receive this slave back as a brother, but we aren't given any indication of what he chose. It stands to reason that Onesimus was received as Paul requested, since otherwise, the influence of the letter would have been diminished and may not have made it into our Bibles, but it's really not known how things turned out with Philemon. What we know for sure, is that Paul grew to love Onesimus and he was part of the fellowship of believers.

In Galatians 3:28, Paul writes: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."* This sort of unity is to be embraced, and we still struggle putting it into practice. It's said that 10:00am on Sunday morning is the most segregated time each week in America.

How do you reach out to brothers and sisters that are different than you? If Paul were writing a letter to you about unity, what issue or what person would he be writing on behalf of?

Prayer: Triune God, you demonstrate community in ways beyond our comprehension. "Expand our concept of the people of God. Help us grow into a Church that is a worthy and accurate representation of your character and calling."² May we be one as you are one. Amen.

Day 6—Community Restored

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new...." Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face,

and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” -Revelation 21:1-5, 22:1-5

These beautiful words come from the last two chapters of the Bible. They’re part of the vision given to John and recorded in Revelation. They speak of a beautiful time when pain will be no more. The tears of us who cry will be wiped away, in the very presence of God. There will be healing for the nations and all God’s servants will see God and worship together. God’s design for creation redeemed and restored. It’s a time to anticipate with joy. It will be the ultimate gathering together of God’s people.

There will be nothing like the gathering of all the saints in “the new heaven and new earth,” but we get a taste of it every once in awhile right here. When we join hearts in prayer, when we gather with other Christians to sing, when we gather at a funeral to celebrate life and resurrection. Most notably, each time we gather for communion we celebrate the gathering of all the saints. Communion liturgy (the stuff we say before taking communion), includes “And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn”.³ We commune together with all those who have gone before, in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

Which parts of your faith are most important to you? Are those parts timeless? Would they have been important to your great-great-great grandparents? Will they be important to your great-great-great grandchildren? For which saints do you most give thanks? (They don’t need to be officially recognized saints by any church - just people of faith who came before you.) For what aspects of your faith do you want to be remembered?

Prayer: As you pray today, consider that your prayer isn’t just being said by you, but is being prayed by other disciples of Jesus Christ all around the world, in many languages. This particular prayer has been prayed all the way back to the time Jesus taught his original disciples to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

¹ Jones, R Douglas. *Dawn to Dark: A Book of Christian Prayer*. The House Studio, Kansas City, MO. 2012. (Page 135).

² Jones, R Douglas. *Dawn to Dark: A Book of Christian Prayer*. The House Studio, Kansas City, MO. 2012. (Page 70).

³ *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. 1992. *Service of Word and Table I*. The Great Thanksgiving. Page 36.