

Weekly Devotional : Week 7

March 19-25, 2023


How to use this devotional

For many of us, encountering God's presence and growing in our relationship with him are real desires of ours. However, we may have never been shown ways to practically accomplish those goals. These devotionals are designed to help guide you through different steps as you spend time with God during your week.

We encourage you to set aside space for a daily rhythm of spending time with Jesus. That could be as short as 15 minutes each day or you may want to spend 30 to 45 minutes. It's up to you. Each day's devotion provides an opportunity to reflect, read, pray, and take action in response to your time with God. May God meet you powerfully in this season!

These devotions are written and developed by Molly Ovenden. If you would like to read more of her work or learn more about her creative endeavors, you can visit her website at <https://mollyovenden.com/>

Week 7 : Day 1

 STORY

Imagine this:

You're wandering through a field with rows and rows of grapevines. The morning air wanders with you in a cooling mist that hangs among the vines that signal winter's last hurrah for the year. As you breathe deeply, you feel grateful for the good deal you got to travel to such a beautiful location during an off-peak time of year.

In the distance you see a figure hunched over near a row of vines just a bit along from where you are. You thought you were alone on your morning walk, so you approach with some hesitancy. As you get closer, the hunched figure, an older man with a greying beard, rises up and stretches. You notice cut-off pieces of vines around this man.

As you study him, you startle each other—he hadn't seen you until now. You greet each other, apologize for startling him, and he smiles, laughing a mighty echo of joy. After discussing the weather, always the socially acceptable thing to do upon meeting a stranger, you ask what he's doing.

He begins to explain the process of pruning vines. He tells you various steps to take and which tools he prefers to use and what time of year it works best to prune. A lot of it goes over your head—you're not as keen of a gardener as you'd like to be! But it was a lovely conversation and a pleasant surprise for your morning.

While you don't feel equipped to start your own vineyard, ponder what your new friend shared with you as you walk away. You recall he shared that although in winter it had looked like nothing was happening, so much occurred under the surface, that the vines absorbed as much nutrients as they could so they could bud and blossom in the spring. And, then ultimately produce abundant fruit in the summer and fall harvest seasons.

You think it's interesting that life can look barren and dead during the winter, but when you've prepared for something and the timing is right, it can be thriving in abundance. Your friend in the vineyard also shared how although it may look like he's aggressively cutting off perfectly good pieces of the vine, he's actually been intentional: he's concentrated on where he wants the bulk of the nutrients to be sent so the growth is efficient.

He told about how in a couple months as the vines bud, he'll come back and prune through lots of the buds to remove them. Again, he admitted it may look like he's getting rid of perfectly good opportunities for fruit, but he explained that what he leaves on the vines will be more vibrant and flavorful because of the strategy allowing the vine to produce, big, juicy, high quality fruit, not just lots of little grapes that fight for sunlight and nutrients.

You wander the rest of the rows and out of the field to the cozy spot you're staying while here on vacation. You think about all the little things in your life that you've had to say no to over the years and how some of them made space for really cool experiences and opportunities you might have missed. You wonder if that's kind of what the man in the vineyard spoke to you about in the vines, but in yourself.

 SCRIPTURE

John 15: 1-4

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

 REFLECT

- What part of scripture feels the most challenging? Why?
- What might God want to say to you about Himself as He declares "I am the vine"?
- You might want to write your reflections in your journal.

 PRAYER

Jesus, if you are the vine, then I trust that you will give me what I need. But I don't always feel the trust. Could you speak to me through these stories and scripture? God, I want a supernatural gift of faith to be able to believe. I want to be attached to you. And yet, I worry about what you might prune from my life because I like all the good

things. Teach me what it means to rely on you as the vine. Sometimes I don't understand these verses, but I want to choose to trust that you can help me understand. I am willing to receive from you, Jesus. Amen.

 ACTION

Grab Your Journal.

Write your thoughts in response to the sermon, Alpha video, and/or the above scripture passage. You can set a timer for 5-10 minutes, if you'd like to focus for a time. Otherwise, give yourself a few moments to contemplate what you've read today and write whatever comes to mind. You may choose to journal out your own prayers or questions here, too.

Week 7 : Day 2

 STORY

Imagine this:

You're in the school's art room. You have access to all the art materials in the bins...

Sticky oil pastels to smear on canvas paper.

Watercolors to watch swirl like ballet dances into water when you clean your brush.

Thick acrylic paints to sculpt an almost 3D painting on a board.

Scissors with smooth and jagged and scalloped edged.

Fibrous, handmade papers, shiny foil papers, gauzy material in bright hues of the rainbow, and ribbons of every width and shade.

Your creative heart lights up—more than you ever thought possible. You didn't realize how exciting being around all of these possibilities could be. And you have freedom to create. You don't have anywhere to be.

You simply create. Time holds still as you blend chalks and charcoal, waiting patiently for adhesives to dry. You cut shapes and textures in paper and fabric to attach to this piece of creative joy.

Some of the composition feels risky. You're not used to using some of these materials. And some of what you'd planned to do when you started, didn't work out.

But...

You've come to a pause. You set down your creative implements, your colored pencils, crayons, felt tips. You step back from the easel and desk. You notice how the light hits your creation from different angles. You notice how looking from different perspectives produces surprisingly delightful impact. You love admiring this piece of


art you just created.

You know this is a piece of art you love. You are full of joy and you're proud. You know exactly where in your home you will display it. No matter what anyone else might say about it, you know without a shadow of a doubt that this piece you created is absolutely brilliant.


 SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 2:10

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

 REFLECT

- Which aspect of this scripture feels hopeful to you today? Why?
- What might God want to say to you about creativity? About your value? About your identity?
- You might want to write your reflections in your journal.

 PRAYER

Holy Spirit, come and fill my senses

 ACTION

Engage your senses.


Create a sensory jar. This could be a great family activity, but it's not just for kids.

It could be dry with beans, rice, beads, marbles, tiny figurines, etc. Or, it could be wet with water, glitter, food coloring, sand, tiny pebbles. Allow yourself to become aware of all of your senses as you create it. Then, once you've made the jar—make sure it's sealed shut—and enjoy it.

Hold the jar up to the sunlight, then a lamp: notice the way the glitter glints in different lights. Notice how the rice carries a marble when you tilt the jar slowly, and then when you shake it. Notice what happens in yourself as you allow yourself a moment to play.

Then, when you can, set a timer for 5-10 minutes and write a journal entry to reflect about this sensory experience.

Week 7 : Day 3

 STORY

Imagine this:

It's Thursday evening and you've rushed home from work to come to your daughter's first tee-ball game. You arrive to find your family already sitting down on the sidelines, but there's a lawn chair set up, saved for you. Everyone out in the field runs in circles and practices catching a ball from Coach Tina. It looks like chaos.

All of a sudden, Coach Tina blows her whistle and all of the children stop and huddle together and start shouting and jumping in unison, and she shouts, "Let's have fun, team!"

While the teams play this first game of the season, your family, other parents, and you giggle with pride and joy with each other as each child does his or her best coordinating all of the new skills they're practicing in the game.

One child you notice in the outfield meanders, looking at the clouds, and even at one point sits down and starts picking bits of grass and dandelions.

Another child you notice nearly catches the ball, but drops it and starts crying, running off the field to his dad on the sidelines.

When a third child comes up to bat, Coach Tina places the ball on the tee and encourages him to swing. He misses completely. She encourages him again to, "Keep your eye on the ball, kiddo!" He leans down with a determined look, puts his cheek—no, his eye, literally on the ball. Before Coach Tina can stop him, he swings mightily, cries out, but takes off running around the bases while the other team all herds toward the ball and scrambles to grab it. But, none of them can actually grab ahold of the ball to throw it back.

It is humorous to watch, but why you watch intently is because of that determined look that the little boy has in his eye from keeping his eye literally on the ball. His determination is inspiring. He didn't give up. And now he's done a homerun in his first ever tee-ball game. He missed hitting the ball, but then he didn't miss it. And he gave it his all, trying until he didn't miss.

 READ


"Don't judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I've fallen down and got back up again."

—Nelson Mandela

Take notes on what thoughts come to mind when you read this quote. You may want to add your thoughts into considering the following reflections or prayers.

 REFLECT

- When have you felt like a failure? What made you feel that way?
- When have you felt like a success? What made you feel that way?
- How might your definitions of failure and success alter if you consider resilience?

 PRAYER

Dear God, my job is really challenging right now. I can't seem to figure out how to move forward. I am struggling to make the impact I hoped for when I started. Am I in the wrong job? Did I make a mistake working here? Should I find somewhere else to work?

Dear God, there are lots of things that feel hard right now. My emotions are all over the place. I keep trying to connect with this person (pray specifically about the difficult relationship), I'm putting in all of this effort to reach out, but they aren't reaching back and I want to just cut off from the relationship.

Dear God, I keep struggling with (fill-in your personal emotional or spiritual struggle here) and it feels like I want to get over it or just stop struggling with it. Why do I keep struggling with this? Is it worth pushing through? Is it worth finding healing or resolution with it?

 ACTION


Get Creative.

Spend some quality time with Google to find quotes about perseverance, resilience, overcoming adversity.

Find one or two quotes that stand out to you. Write them on a sticky note, in your notes app on your phone, or in your favorite notebook.

Take 5-10 minutes to reflect on why these quotes resonated with you. You might want to write your thoughts in your journal when you finish.

Week 7 : Day 4

 STORY

Imagine this:

You're on the road, driving. You don't know where you are going, but your passenger and co-pilot tells you exactly where to turn, which exits to take, which lane to be in.

For the first ten minutes or so, you felt really anxious, uncomfortable, because you really wanted to know where you were going, but after a while, you settled in.

Your passenger spoke confidently and in the perfect amount of time so you could make whichever maneuvers necessary and you built up trust working together

like this.

Even though you didn't know where you were going or how you were going to get there, you trusted your co-pilot to lead you the best way. With this trust, you enjoy the scenery with trees and fluffy clouds—is that an eagle? You take in the world's largest (e.g.: lawn chair, ball of twine, walleye, mailbox, etc.), the regal brick buildings set on the same streets with industrial architecture from the 1960s, the old car you drove when you first got your license—this one that just passed you doesn't have nearly as much rust as yours did!

Driving like this brings such a sense of joy and peace that you forget you don't know where you're headed. You genuinely begin to understand how the journey can be just as pleasant as the destination—or even moreso!

You look over at your co-pilot passenger and smile, thanking her for guiding you each moment and every mile. It's time well spent together.


 SCRIPTURE

Psalm 32:8

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

 REFLECT

- If it's true that the LORD would or could guide you in your life, how would you like to respond?
- In which areas of life might God be inviting you into to more trust and giving you an opportunity to follow his leading?
- Where might you be lost in your life journey? What would it mean to you to have your life turn around in a moment, all because you choose to listen to and follow a good guide?

 PRAYER

Breathe in: LORD, I receive your plans for my life.
Breathe out: LORD, I give you all my own plans.

Breathe in: I believe that God you'll lead me.

Breathe out: I'm choosing to follow your way.

Repeat as many times as you'd like to.

 ACTION

Relational moment.

Consider a friend you've not caught up with for a few weeks or months or even longer. Ask them to go on a walk or a drive with you. Allow yourselves to drive or walk through various backroads or around your familiar neighborhood circuits—wherever your friend wants to go.

Allow your conversation to meander in the same way as you walk or drive. You may want to share some of what you're learning this week or something you're struggling with or celebrating. You might even want to ask for prayer or offer to pray for your friend.

After you spend time together, reflect on how you feel after making this connection.

Week 7 : Day 5

STORY

Imagine this:

It's the first of the month and it's a Monday—it's even the first day of the new year! You wake up feeling hopeful about all the plans you have for this year. It's going to be better this year, you promise yourself—and your family members. You're determined.

You have a new planner notebook (or open a new note in your smartphone app) and you begin laying out your best plans for the year. You put down in the written word all of the trips you want to make, books you want to read or shows you want to see, all of the skills you want to learn so you can be an even better (employee/mom/neighbor/artist/human/etc.)

You plan your exercise and nutrition routines, determined to use your air fryer, slow cooker, juicer, and pressure cooker each week to make your meal planning so much more efficient.

You plan everything. Your note (or your bullet journal planner) is breathtaking with all of the goals and plans you've made.

And now, you feel something like a tap on the shoulder. You turn to look and nobody is there—maybe it's just your pajamas uncrumpling. You've drunk a lot of coffee already this morning, maybe you're a bit jittery. You make a note to cut back on caffeine this year.

All of a sudden you hear, like a wisp of a thought in your mind, a quiet, gentle voice say, "Where do I fit into all of your plans?"

You feel puzzled, wondering where that voice has come from, or what it just a thought? You go back to planning and taking notes, dreaming up your best year ever.

And here it is again: "Will you trust me to lead you through this year?"

You pause. Could this be Holy Spirit? Or is this just your imagination? You decide to consider, if this is the Holy Spirit you've heard about in the bible—the one who gives advice as a counselor and leads and guides people—what would happen if you replied to that voice?

What might happen if you ask the Holy Spirit to help you trust him to guide you through life one step at a time?

You take the last couple sips of your coffee and write a few notes in your notebook.

“What if...?” you whisper.

 SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 16:9

In their hearts humans plan their course,
but the Lord establishes their steps.

 ACTION

Examen.

Reflect on your week using an ancient spiritual practice called, examen. You may want to add these examen reflections to your other journal entries from this week.

You can spend as little or as long as you'd like on each stage of this examen process. However, if this is a new practice or if you're short on time, you can start with 1 to 5 minutes for each stage of the examen.

- a) Consider this week's consolations - What good happened this week that filled me up, brought me joy, gave me energy? Why, God, did this fill me up? Where were you in this moment/instance/experience? God, thanks for being here with me in the consolations.
- b) Consider this week's desolations - What bad happened this week that drained me, felt sad or angering, emptied me? God, why did this empty me? Where were you in this moment/instance/experience? Thanks for being here with me in the desolations.
- c) Ask God: What do you want to say to me today about trusting you? About following your lead? About where I can let go of control?
- d) Ask God: What do you think of me? What have you given me awareness for today that's more than I had at the beginning of the week?
- e) Spend a moment thanking God for showing up—even if it wasn't how you'd expected.