

# RIVER Flow

*Seven Days of Devotional Practice*

**May 31 - June 6, 2026**

## **GOSPEL FLUENCY PRACTICUM**

We are now in the afterglow of the recently concluded *Fluent in the Gospel* sermon series, and the question that series ended with is the one we now have to live with: what does it actually look like to speak the truths of Jesus into the everyday stuff of our lives? Knowing the gospel and being able to articulate it into a friend's grief, a family member's anxiety, or our own daily struggles are very different things. Fluency is not the same as familiarity. Fluency comes from immersion and practice – from learning to think and feel in the language of the kingdom until it becomes second nature.

Over the next three Sabbaths, we are going to do a gospel fluency practicum, a hands-on working-out of what we have heard preached. I have picked three formational books to guide us. The first is Jeff Vanderstelt's *Gospel Fluency: Speaking the Truths of Jesus into the Everyday Stuff of Life*. Vanderstelt is a teaching pastor whose ministry has been built on one conviction: that Christians struggle to speak naturally about Jesus not because they lack technique but because they have never become genuinely fluent in the gospel themselves. He offers key practices – repeatable, life-shaping habits – for building that fluency. Each day's devotional this week will present, develop, and apply one of those ideas. Reflect on each carefully and begin applying it in the relationships and conversations God sets in front of you.

- Pastor Mel Baga, D.Min.  
Lead Pastor, Auburn SDA Church

# DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

## SUNDAY, May 31 – Still Learning to Believe

*"I believe; help my unbelief!" – Mark 9:24*

**Read:** Mark 9:17-24; Galatians 2:20

**Reflect:** Most of us divide the world into believers and unbelievers – either you have trusted Jesus or you have not. But there is a different way to think about belief that catches us off guard the first time we hear it. Every Christian still has areas of functional unbelief. Every one of us has places – relationships, finances, vocation, body, future, identity – where we do not yet truly trust God's word and work. We know the right things. We can quote the verses. We just do not always believe them where it matters most.

Sanctification, on this reading, is not a single crossing of a line but a lifelong movement from partial unbelief toward deeper belief across more and more of our lives. The gospel is not only for those who have never believed. It is daily bread for those of us still learning to trust.

The father in Mark 9 cries out what most of us feel but rarely say aloud: "I believe; help my unbelief." This is not a contradiction. It is the most honest sentence a person of faith can pray. Something real has taken root, and something in me still resists. Paul says in Galatians 2:20 that the life he now lives he lives by faith in the Son of God – not as a finished accomplishment but as a daily orientation. The places where you do not yet trust are not failures to hide. They are invitations to bring honest unbelief into the presence of a Savior who already knows.

**Respond:** Where are you functioning as though Jesus's work is not enough? Name it. Bring it specifically to him.

**Pray:** Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief. Show me where I have not yet trusted you, and meet me there with the grace that first found me. Amen.

## MONDAY, June 1– Give Them Jesus

*"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." – Galatians 2:20*

**Read:** Galatians 2:20; 2 Corinthians 4:7-12; Ephesians 4:11-15

**Reflect:** When people share their struggles with us, our most natural instinct is to help. We offer advice. We suggest a book. We point to a Scripture passage. We share what worked for us. None of this is wrong. But there is a deeper move we often miss – the move that turns ordinary care into pastoral care. The deeper move is to give them Jesus.

That phrase can become glib very quickly. We can use it to mean nothing more than quoting a verse, recommending a sermon, or telling a struggling friend that Jesus loves them and changing the subject. That is not giving them Jesus. That is talking about Jesus while leaving the person essentially alone in their pain. Giving them Jesus is something deeper and more demanding. It means that you, the believer in whom Christ dwells, become the means by which Christ becomes accessible to this person, in this moment, in this struggle. Paul says it without flinching: it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. He tells the Corinthians that we carry this treasure in jars of clay, so that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. The treasure is real. The jar is us.

This is why the practice requires us to be in a right frame of thought and emotional state ourselves. You cannot give what you are not currently receiving. If you are running on resentment, anxiety, or self-protection, then what you transmit will be those things, even if your words are about Jesus. But if you are abiding – present to Christ in yourself before you are present to the person in front of you – then the listening, the patience, the steadiness, the words you eventually speak, all become a way Christ touches the person through you. That is what Paul means by speaking the truth in love. Not delivering accurate information about Jesus. Becoming, in your own embodied presence, a place where Jesus can be met.

**Respond:** Think of one person who is struggling. Before you ask what to say, ask what state you need to be in to actually carry Christ to them.

**Pray:** Lord Jesus, live in me today. Make me a clay jar that actually carries the treasure. When I am with people who are hurting, let them meet you through me. Amen.

## TUESDAY, June 2– The War of the Mind

*"We take every thought captive to obey Christ." – 2 Corinthians 10:5*

**Read:** 2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 6:10-18

**Reflect:** There is a battle going on, and most of it happens between our ears. The lies we rehearse about God, the accusations we believe about ourselves, the temptations that pull us off course, the comparisons that breed bitterness, the fears that paralyze our obedience – these are not minor static. They are the front line of a real spiritual conflict.

The practice is not positive thinking. It is gospel-centered spiritual warfare. There are four moves: capture your thoughts and examine them honestly; bring them into submission to what is true of Jesus; consider what fruit those thoughts are producing in your life; and fight back not with willpower but with gospel truths.

Paul tells the Corinthians that the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds, to demolish arguments, to take every thought captive. This is not a call to suppress thinking. It is a call to examine thinking. The question is not "can I stop thinking this?" but "does this thought line up with what is true of Jesus and what is true of me in him?" When a thought does not line up, you do not have to host it. You can capture it, name it, and replace it with what the gospel says.

The armor Paul describes in Ephesians 6 is almost entirely gospel-shaped: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the word of God. None of these are virtues we manufacture by sheer effort. They are realities we put on because they belong to Christ and therefore belong to us. The battle is won by remembering and believing, not by trying harder.

**Respond:** What thought have you been rehearsing this week that does not line up with what is true of you in Jesus? Name it. Examine it. Replace it.

**Pray:** Lord Jesus, you have already defeated every enemy of my soul. Teach me to fight from your victory rather than toward it. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, June 3 – Tracing the Fruit to the Root

*"A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit."*

– Luke 6:43

**Read:** Proverbs 4:23; Luke 6:43-45; Galatians 5:16-25

**Reflect:** When we see something in our lives we do not like – recurring anxiety, sudden anger, chronic comparison, persistent compulsion – our first move is usually to attack the behavior. We resolve to do better. We set new boundaries. We promise ourselves we will not do it again. But behavior is fruit, and fruit grows from roots. The fruit we are unhappy with is symptom, not source. The source is what we believe – about ourselves, and beneath that, about God.

The pastoral practice is to trace the fruit backward through the trunk to the root. Then, having found the distorted root, bring the gospel to that exact place and let new fruit grow from the inside out. This is the difference between behavior modification, which prunes symptoms while leaving the disease in place, and gospel transformation, which goes to the source and changes everything.

There are four diagnostic questions worth memorizing. Moving from root to fruit: Who is God? What has he done? Who am I in light of his work? How should I live in light of who I am? To diagnose unbelief, reverse the questions. Start with what you are doing or experiencing right now. Ask what that reveals about what you believe about yourself. Ask what your belief about yourself reveals about your functional view of God. Suddenly you are at the root.

Underneath every sinful behavior is a failure to believe a specific truth about God – that he is great, so I do not have to be in control; that he is good, so I do not have to look elsewhere; that he is gracious, so I do not have to prove myself.

**Respond:** Choose one area where the fruit is not what you want. Walk it backward. What do you believe about yourself there? About God?

**Pray:** Holy Spirit, lead me beneath my behaviors to my beliefs – and beneath my beliefs to where I have not trusted you. Speak the gospel to the root. Amen.

## THURSDAY, June 4 – He is the Better

*"In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son... the radiance of the glory of God." – Hebrews 1:2-3*

**Read:** Hebrews 1:1-4; John 6:32-35; Matthew 11:28-30

**Reflect:** There is a habit of mind that, once you learn it, changes how you read your Bible, hear your own thoughts, and counsel your own heart. The habit is to recognize that Jesus is the true and better of everything we are tempted to find our life in. He is the better boss, the better parent, the better friend, the better son. In the biblical story, he is the true and better Adam, the better Moses, the better David, the better priest, the better sacrifice, the better temple. Every type, every shadow, every longing in the human story points toward him and finds its fulfillment in him.

The practice is daily. When we notice ourselves reaching for something or someone to give us what only Jesus can give – approval, security, rest, significance, love – we name the substitute and then name, as specifically as we can, how Jesus is better in precisely that area.

The letter to the Hebrews opens with one of the most majestic sentences in all of Scripture. God spoke in many ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken by his Son, the radiance of his glory. The whole letter then demonstrates what that means. Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses, greater than Aaron, greater than the whole sacrificial system. This is pastoral medicine for people tempted to return to lesser things because they have not yet seen clearly enough how much better Jesus is.

Jesus himself says in Matthew 11 that he gives rest to the weary. Every substitute we reach for promises rest and weighs us down. Jesus promises rest and delivers it.

**Respond:** Where are you looking for what only Jesus can give? Name the substitute. Then name how Jesus is better in precisely that area.

**Pray:** Jesus, forgive me for settling for so much less than you. You are the bread of life. You are the living water. You are enough. Amen.

## FRIDAY, June 5– Listen First, Then Speak

*"The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out." – Proverbs 20:5*

**Read:** John 4:1–26; Proverbs 20:5; 1 Peter 3:13–16; James 1:19

**Reflect:** Most of us think of gospel fluency as a speaking skill. We imagine we need to find the right words and deliver them at the right moment. But the deepest fluency is actually a listening posture that eventually speaks. The model is Jesus at the well in John 4. He does not open with a presentation. He opens with a request – give me a drink – and then, through short questions and provocative statements, he draws out the longing in the Samaritan woman's heart until everything she is thirsting for is on the surface. Only then does he name what she has needed all along.

The discipline is twofold. We listen to the person – their words, their story, what they are hoping for and what they are afraid of. And we listen up to the Holy Spirit, asking him to show us what is actually being said, what lies beneath the surface, where the gospel will land as truly good news.

Every person we meet is already inside a gospel-shaped story, whether they know it or not. They have a sense of where their identity comes from. They have a story about what is fundamentally wrong with the world. They have someone or something they are looking to for rescue. They have a hope for what they want their future to be. The seventy-two were sent to listen for those stories in the households they entered. So are we.

Peter's instruction to always be prepared to give a reason for the hope within us is a call to readiness, not a call to lead every conversation with a presentation. The reason is given when the question is asked.

**Respond:** Think of one person God has placed in your life who does not yet know Jesus. What do you actually know about their story? What would it look like to listen more before you speak?

**Pray:** Spirit of God, you are the Helper and the Counselor. Make me a person of understanding, ready to give a reason for the hope that is in me when the moment comes. Amen.

## SABBATH, June 6– Eating to Remember

*"Do this in remembrance of me." – Luke 22:19*

**Read:** Luke 22:14–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Acts 2:42–47

**Reflect:** From the very beginning of the biblical story, eating has carried theological weight. The tree in the garden. The Passover lamb. The manna in the wilderness. The feeding of the five thousand. The meals Jesus shared with sinners. The Last Supper. The wedding feast of the Lamb. Eating is never just

eating. Every meal is meant to be a moment of remembrance and worship, a small rehearsal of the gospel, a foretaste of the great feast to come.

When Jesus sent the seventy-two in Luke 10, he told them to eat what was set before them in the households they entered – not to stay above ordinary life, but to be present at the table. The kingdom comes near through table and hospitality, not just through proclamation.

Luke tells us that Jesus had earnestly desired to eat the Passover with his disciples before he suffered. The meal mattered to him – not as ritual but as communion. He took the bread and said this is my body given for you. He took the cup and said this is the new covenant in my blood. The meal became the proclamation. Paul tells the Corinthians that as often as they eat the bread and drink the cup, they proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. The meal preaches the gospel even when no one is preaching.

The early church devoted themselves to the breaking of bread – not as a weekly liturgy alone but as a daily way of life. Every meal is a small arrow pointing toward the wedding supper of the Lamb. Sabbath is the day when we let that pointing become explicit.

**Respond:** Today, whether at the Lord's table in worship or at your own table at home, eat with intention. What is this meal pointing toward?

**Pray:** Lord Jesus, you are the bread that came down from heaven. Let every meal today be an act of worship – a small foretaste of the feast that is coming. Amen.

# GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between speaking the gospel and speaking "gospelish" – gospel-sounding language that doesn't actually land as good news in a specific situation? Where have you experienced this difference, either in giving or receiving?
2. Where in your own life do you sense areas of functional unbelief – places where you know the right things but don't yet trust them? What would it mean to name those honestly in community?
3. The instinct to "give people Jesus" can become glib – a pious phrase that lets us off the hook of actually being present to someone. Paul says Christ lives in us, and that we carry this treasure in jars of clay. What does it look like, practically, to be the kind of person through whom Jesus actually becomes accessible to a struggling friend – and what state do we need to be in ourselves to carry that?
4. Try the fruit-to-root diagnostic together. Pick a common struggle (anxiety, anger, comparison, control) and walk it backward as a group – from the behavior to the belief about ourselves, and then to the functional belief about God beneath it. What does the exercise reveal?
5. Where are you reaching for something or someone other than Jesus to give you what only he can give – approval, rest, security, identity? How would you name him as "the better" in that specific area?
6. What does it actually look like to listen for someone's gospel story – their sense of identity, their fundamental problem, their functional savior, their deepest hope – before you speak the gospel into their life? Why is that posture so difficult to maintain?
7. The Luke 10 image places us as the regular disciples sent two by two into the whole world. Who are your "two by two" companions, and what households or relationships has God already placed you near? What would it look like to be a person of peace this week?