

# RIVER Flow

## *Seven Days of Devotional Practice*

June 7 - 13, 2026

### **LOVING GOD AND COUNTRY**

Two Weeks Toward the Religious Liberty Summit  
Week 1 – Ordering Our Lives

On Sabbath, June 20, our church family will gather for a Religious Liberty Summit presented by the Church State Council here at Auburn Seventh-day Adventist Church. We will hear from Alan Reinach, president of the Church State Council (9:30), from Andy Im of the General Conference's Public Affairs and Religious Liberty Department (10:45), and with a panel discussion in the afternoon. These two weeks are a way of preparing our hearts for that day rooted in Scripture.

Let me say what this is and is not. It is not about politics or party; it is not about loving our country any less. We love this land. These devotionals are an invitation to something deeper: to look honestly at our own hearts, and to fall more in love with Jesus and his kingdom – so that we can love our country in the right way.

Every generation of Christians has had to learn how to hold two real loves together – our love for God and our love for our homeland. It is easy to let the two blur. We do not point fingers at anyone, least of all across political lines, but because every human heart is prone to love good things in the wrong order. A few books have helped me think it through – by Paul Miller, Russell Moore, and John Barry on Roger Williams – but our text is Scripture itself. Read each day slowly. Pray each prayer as your own. And let the Spirit do the gentle, searching work that only he can do.

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

# Daily Devotional Guide

## SUNDAY, June 7 – Whose Kingdom Is This?

*"My kingdom is not of this world."* – John 18:36

**Read:** John 18:33-37; 1 Peter 2:9-10

**Reflect:** Most of us carry two loves that run very deep – our love for God and our love for the land we call home. Both are good gifts. It is a grace to be born somewhere, to belong to a people, to have a flag and a song and a history that move us. Scripture never asks us to feel nothing for our country. The question these two weeks is gentler and more searching than anything political: how do these two loves sit together in our hearts, and in what order?

Jesus once stood before Pilate, who wanted to know whether he was a king with a kingdom to defend. "My kingdom is not of this world," he answered. It is not a territory on any map; it has no border to guard, no capital to capture, no election to win. And when Peter calls us a holy nation and a royal priesthood, he is not speaking of any country on earth, but of a people Jesus is gathering from every land. We belong, first and most deeply, to a kingdom that nothing on earth can give us and nothing on earth can take away.

This is not a word against our country. It is a word that sets our country safely in its place. When we remember that the kingdom of God is not America, or any nation, a great weight lifts – the fear that everything depends on whether our nation gets it right. It does not. The King is on his throne, and his kingdom is not of this world. We can love our home with open hands precisely because our deepest home is in him.

**Respond:** Where have you, without quite meaning to, asked your country to be something only God's kingdom can be? Bring it to him quietly today.

**Pray:** Lord Jesus, your kingdom is not of this world. Let me love my home with a glad and open heart, while I rest my whole life in you, the King whose throne nothing can shake. Amen.

## MONDAY, June 8– The Image on the Coin

*"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." – Mark 12:17*

**Read:** Mark 12:13-17; Matthew 22:37-38

**Reflect:** When people tried to trap Jesus with a question about taxes, he asked for a coin and pointed to the face stamped on it. Give Caesar what bears Caesar's image, he said – the coin is his. There is a real and rightful place for our duties to our country. We pay our taxes, honor our leaders, pray for our nation, serve our neighbors. Jesus is no enemy of good and grateful citizenship; he honors it.

But he did not stop there. Give to God the things that are God's. And what bears the image of God? Not a coin – you do. You were stamped with his likeness in the very beginning. So our money and our civic duties belong to the ordinary, honorable business of life; but our worship, our deepest allegiance, the quiet center of the heart – these were never Caesar's to ask for. They belong to God alone, who made us in his own image.

The gentle danger for any of us who love our country is not that we love it, but that, little by little, we begin to give it the part of us that belongs only to God. The old saints used to say that sin is usually a good thing loved out of order, and C. S. Lewis once warned that love of country "becomes a demon when it becomes a god." So we ask ourselves, tenderly and without alarm: is my love for my country resting safely beneath my love for God – or has it quietly crept toward his place? Give Caesar the coin. Give God yourself.

**Respond:** Name your loves honestly before God today. Is any earthly love sitting where only he belongs? Simply ask him to set it right.

**Pray:** Lord, I bear your image, and I am yours. Let me give Caesar his coin with a glad heart, and give you the worship that belongs to you alone. Amen.

## TUESDAY, June 9– God's People in Every Land

*"You are a chosen race... a holy nation." – 1 Peter 2:9*

**Read:** 1 Peter 2:9-10; Galatians 3:26-29; 2 Chronicles 7:14

**Reflect:** There is a verse many of us have prayed over our country with real love: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray... I will heal their land." It is a good prayer, and the longing behind it – that God would heal our land – is a holy one. From our earliest days, Americans have loved to imagine this nation as a kind of new Israel,

chosen and set apart for God. It is easy to see why. The hope is sincere, and the love is real.

Yet when God first spoke those words, he spoke them to his covenant people – and the New Testament shows us where that covenant finally comes to rest. Peter takes Israel's own treasured titles – chosen race, holy nation, God's own people – and gives them not to a country but to the church, gathered from every nation under heaven. Paul tells us that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, and that all who belong to him are Abraham's children and heirs of the promise. The "people called by his name" are not the citizens of any one land. They are the people of the Lamb, drawn lovingly out of every land.

This makes our country no less dear; it simply lets the promises rest where they truly belong. When we long for God to heal our land, we are right to pray – and we pray as members of his worldwide family, alongside believers in every nation, rather than as a country claiming for itself a covenant that belongs to Christ and his church. The healing our land most needs is the same healing every land needs: the gospel of Jesus, freely offered to every heart.

**Respond:** Pray for your country today – and widen the prayer to include God's people and his work in other lands too.

**Pray:** Father, your people are gathered from every nation by the blood of the Lamb. Teach me to pray for my country as one small part of your great, worldwide family. Amen.

## **WEDNESDAY, June 10 – Greatness, or the Cross**

*"You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."*  
– Matthew 4:10

**Read:** Matthew 4:8-11; Matthew 5:3-10

**Reflect:** We all want the things we love to flourish – our families, our church, our country. There is nothing wrong with hoping our nation will be good, and strong, and a blessing in the world. But somewhere along the way it is easy to begin measuring God's favor by power and success, and to assume that if only we are faithful enough, greatness will surely follow as the proof of his blessing.

Jesus met that very assumption on a mountaintop. The tempter showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and offered them in an instant – real greatness, no cross required – if only Jesus would bow. He refused: worship the Lord your God and serve him only. And when he sat down to teach what God actually blesses, he turned our instincts gently

upside down. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted – not the powerful, not the dominant, not the great.

God's road to glory runs straight through Gethsemane, and it never goes around the cross. So when we feel the pull to measure his blessing by a nation's strength, we can quietly remember the mountain, and the answer Jesus gave there. The cross is the shape of everything God does. We do not need our country to be great in order to know that God is good. He has already shown us his glory – and it looked like a Lamb who laid down his life.

**Respond:** Where are you tempted to read strength or success as the measure of God's favor? Hold it gently against the cross and the Beatitudes.

**Pray:** Lord Jesus, you refused the kingdoms of the world to walk the way of the cross. Free me from every hunger for greatness, and let me find your glory in the way of the Lamb. Amen.

## THURSDAY, June 11 – Born, and Born Again

*"Do not presume to say... We have Abraham as our father."* – Matthew 3:9

**Read:** Matthew 3:7-10; John 3:1-8

**Reflect:** Many of us came to faith through a Christian family, a Christian heritage, a Christian community, and that is a gift to be deeply grateful for. But our gifts can quietly become our resting places. It is possible to lean, without ever realizing it, on the faith of our parents, the Christianity of our culture, the comfortable sense that being raised among believers in a Christian land has somehow settled our account with God.

John the Baptist met that exact comfort at the Jordan, in people sure of their good standing, and he answered them firmly but for their good: do not say "we have Abraham as our father," for God can raise up children for Abraham from these very stones. And Jesus said much the same to Nicodemus, a man with every religious credential: unless one is born again, born from above by the Spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Not born into the right family, not born into the right nation – born again. The kingdom has no inherited citizenship. We each come in the very same way.

This is wonderfully good news. It means no one is shut out for having been born in the wrong place, and no one is safely in for having been born in the right one. Heritage cannot save us – but it cannot disqualify us either. The door is the same for all of us: the new birth, offered freely by the Spirit

to anyone who will come. So we come, not leaning on our heritage, but empty-handed and glad, to be made new.

**Respond:** Is there any quiet confidence in heritage or upbringing you have leaned on? Set it down, and come simply, to be born again.

**Pray:** Lord, I bring no pedigree to your throne – only my need of you. Born again by your Spirit, make me your child by faith alone, and let me marvel that the door is open to all. Amen.

## FRIDAY, June 12– The Spirit, Not the Sword

*"Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord."  
– Zechariah 4:6*

**Read:** Zechariah 4:6; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5; Daniel 3:16-18

**Reflect:** Because we love what is good, we can feel a strong pull to protect it – to use whatever influence we have to make sure the right things win. That impulse is understandable, even loving. But Scripture keeps teaching us, patiently, that God's work moves in a surprising way. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord." The kingdom of God simply does not advance the way the kingdoms of the world advance.

This is the quiet wisdom behind our long Adventist love of religious liberty. We have always believed that faith won by force is not yet the faith of Jesus, and that the gospel makes its way not by the sword or the statute but by the Spirit and the Word. Paul reminds us that our weapons are not the weapons of the flesh; they carry a different and deeper power. We hold this conviction not as a complaint against anyone, but as a treasure to guard – and we guard it for everyone, because we want every conscience, not only our own, to be free.

The book of Daniel gives us the picture. Three young men served their king faithfully in every lawful thing, and only at the point of worship did they say, gently and immovably, that they could not bow. They did not despise their king or their nation; they simply kept their worship for God alone, and they would never have dreamed of forcing anyone else's. That is the freedom we cherish, and the freedom this Sabbath's Summit is about: a love for God that is given, never compelled, and offered freely to all.

**Respond:** Where might you be tempted to trust force or pressure rather than the gentle work of the Spirit? Ask God to make you patient, the way he is patient with you.

**Pray:** Lord, not by might, nor by power, but by your Spirit. Teach me to win hearts the way you won mine – by love, by truth, and by your patient, gentle Spirit. Amen.

## **SABBATH, June 13– Worship Freely Given**

*"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."  
– John 4:24*

**Read:** John 4:21-24; Matthew 13:24-30; Exodus 31:12-17

**Reflect:** At a well in Samaria, Jesus told a tired and thirsty woman that the Father is seeking worshipers who will worship him in spirit and in truth. Notice the kind of worship the Father seeks – not worship that is required or coerced, but worship that rises freely from a heart that loves him. By its very nature, the worship God desires can only be given. It can never be forced.

That is why Jesus, in his parable, asked the servants not to go tearing through the field pulling weeds, lest they uproot the good wheat along with them. The sorting belongs to God, at the harvest, in his own gentle wisdom – not to us in the meantime. We are not called to police one another's hearts. We are called to love, to witness, to pray, and to trust the Lord of the harvest with what only he can see and judge.

And here is the Sabbath, the most beautiful picture of freely given worship in all of Scripture. God made it a sign between himself and his people – not a duty wrung out of us, but rest and worship offered gladly, week after week, by people who simply love him. You cannot force a heart to rest in God; you can only be invited into it. So enter this Sabbath as exactly that – an invitation, not a demand. Lay your work down, let your worship be free and unhurried, and rest in the God who loves to be loved.

**Respond:** Keep this Sabbath as freely given worship. And gently ask: is there anyone whose heart I have tried to pressure rather than love? Release them to God, who is patient.

**Pray:** Father, you seek worship in spirit and truth, and you never force the heart. Let my Sabbath rest be the free and glad homage of a heart that loves you. Amen.

# GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. We each carry two real loves – for God and for our home. How do you sense those two loves sitting together in your own heart? What helps you keep them in the right order?
2. Jesus said to give Caesar the coin and God the image – and we bear God's image. What rightly belongs to good citizenship, and what belongs to God alone? Where is that line easy to blur, even with good intentions?
3. Many of us have prayed 2 Chronicles 7:14 over our country. How does it change things to remember that God's "people called by his name" are his worldwide church, gathered from every nation?
4. Jesus refused the kingdoms of the world on the mountain and blessed the meek and the poor in spirit. How might any of us be tempted to measure God's favor by power or success – and what does the cross say instead?
5. John the Baptist warned against resting in "we have Abraham as our father." Where might we quietly lean on heritage or upbringing instead of the new birth? Why is it such good news that the door is the same for everyone?
6. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit." Why does God's work advance by the Spirit rather than by force? Why do we, as Adventists, treasure freedom of conscience for everyone, and not only for ourselves?
7. The Father seeks worshipers in spirit and truth, and the Sabbath is worship freely given. Why can love for God never be forced? How does the Sabbath itself quietly teach us this?