

# RIVER *Flow*

*Seven Days of Devotional Practice*

June 28 – July 4, 2026

## **LOVING OUR COUNTRY WELL**

A Week to Ready Our Hearts

For Our Country's 250th Birthday

This Sabbath our nation turns two hundred and fifty years old. A milestone like this rightly stirs gratitude in us – for the place we were given to call home, for the people who have shaped our lives, for freedoms we too easily assume. To love one's homeland is no small or shameful thing; Scripture treats it as part of how God made us, setting each of us in a particular land among a particular people.

Yet many of us have felt this love grow heavier lately. What used to be simple thankfulness now arrives tangled with worry, or soured into disappointment, and we sense there ought to be a healthier way to carry it. These seven days are a deliberate pause to ask how – and to let Scripture, rather than the news, shape the answer.

Two ancient letters will lead us: one God sent to his people in exile (Jeremiah 29), and one Peter sent to believers scattered through the empire (1 Peter 2). Together they show us how to love a country deeply without crowning it as a god or reducing it to its failures. Read each day unhurried, pray each prayer as your own, and come to this birthday Sabbath grateful, settled, and free.

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

# Daily Devotional Guide

## SUNDAY, June 28 – A Good and Tender Love

*“The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” – Psalm 16:6*

**Read:** Psalm 16:5–6; Acts 17:24–27; Deuteronomy 8:7–10

**Reflect:** As our country reaches this milestone, it is natural – and right – to feel affection for it. We are fond of its landscapes and its seasons, the towns that raised us, the people whose lives have crossed ours here. That fondness is nothing to be ashamed of or argued out of. The Lord designed us to be rooted, to belong to a particular people in a particular place.

The Scriptures make room for this gladly. David surveys the portion God has measured out to him and calls it lovely, a beautiful inheritance. Paul tells the thinkers of Athens that the Creator himself appoints every nation its era and its borders, all of it meant to lead people to reach out for him. Our homeland is one of those appointments, and to give thanks for it is itself a kind of worship.

So we open the week with gratitude before anything else. Only once we have let ourselves simply love our country can we ask, without anxiety, how to love it rightly. The trouble is never affection itself, but affection that drifts from its proper place. The work of these seven days is to settle it back where it belongs – underneath our love for God, where at last it can rest and be glad.

**Respond:** Before any harder questions, name a few specific gifts of your country and your home, and hand each one back to God with thanks.

**Pray:** Father, you placed me in a good land and gave me people to love. Accept my gratitude this week, and keep this love in its right order – a gift from your hand, never a rival to your throne. Amen.

## MONDAY, June 29 – When Love Becomes a god

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

**Read:** Matthew 4:8–10; Exodus 20:2–3; Psalm 20:7

**Reflect:** Affection for a country can quietly mutate into something it was never meant to be. It happens whenever we start treating our

nation as uniquely God's own — singled out like ancient Israel, entrusted with a sacred destiny — until devotion to God and allegiance to the country blur into one. The instinct can feel deeply reverent. What it produces is anything but restful.

Jesus met this temptation himself. Shown every kingdom in its glory, he was offered the whole of it — power without a cross — in exchange for a single act of homage, and he refused with the most basic loyalty there is: God alone is to be worshiped and served. Whenever our faith comes to believe it must seize a nation in order to be safe, it has swapped trust in God for a grip on power — and a grip like that can never loosen. There is always one more contest to win, one more loss to dread.

The first commandment speaks tenderly into all this: let nothing stand before God, not even a homeland we treasure. The psalmist names the choice plainly — some stake everything on chariots and horses, but our confidence rests in the name of the Lord. The moment we stop requiring our country to be holy, a great weight slips off it, and off us.

**Respond:** Where has your hope for God's work quietly merged with a hope for your side to hold power? Set that down before him today.

**Pray:** Lord Jesus, you turned from every kingdom to take up the cross. Guard my worship for you alone, and free me from ever needing my nation to take your place. Amen.

## TUESDAY, June 30 — When Love Turns to Contempt

*"Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log in your own?" — Matthew 7:3*

**Read:** Matthew 7:1-5; Luke 18:9-14

**Reflect:** A second way of mishandling this love runs in the opposite direction, and it wounds just as deeply. Where the first temptation all but worships the country, this one can barely bless it. It reads the nation's whole story as little more than a list of offenses, withholds any good word until several complaints are attached, and mistakes its own severity for moral clarity.

Jesus spoke straight to this posture. He asked why we fixate on the speck in someone else's eye while a plank juts out of our own. He pictured two men at prayer — one thanking God that he was better

than the rest, the other simply pleading for mercy – and it was the second who went home forgiven. Scorn can dress itself up as conscience, but a heart that has run dry of blessing has wandered just as far as the heart bowed before an idol.

For all their apparent opposition, these two errors are close kin. Each is thoroughly convinced of its own rightness – one certain the country is sacred, the other certain that it alone is pure enough to pass judgment. Both deal out heaps of verdict and almost no grace. And both demand of a nation what no nation can give: that it be flawless, or that it be holy.

**Respond:** Be honest about which way your heart tilts – toward worship or toward scorn – and ask God to trade both for honest, humble love.

**Pray:** Lord, take the plank from my own eye. Heal me of contempt as surely as of idolatry, and give me back a heart still able to bless. Amen.

## WEDNESDAY, July 1 – Seek the Welfare of the City

*“Seek the welfare of the city... and pray to the Lord on its behalf.” – Jeremiah 29:7*

**Read:** Jeremiah 29:4–7; Hebrews 11:13–16

**Reflect:** God’s people received this letter at their lowest point. Their city lay in ruins, and they had been carried hundreds of miles into the homeland of the empire that had crushed them. Few people in history held a stronger case for resentment, and Babylon had certainly earned it – proud, violent, and thick with idols.

We would expect the message to urge defiance, or at least a cold distance. Instead the Lord tells them to put down roots: build houses, plant gardens, raise families, and actively work for the good – the shalom, the wholeness and flourishing – of the very city that held them, praying for it all the while, since their own peace was wrapped up in its peace. He asks them to bless a place that is far from righteous, without ever pretending it is holy or that it is theirs.

This is the posture neither the worshiper nor the cynic can take up. It means giving yourself honestly to the good of an imperfect country that is not your final home, laboring over ground you do not ultimately own. The exile is free to love Babylon precisely because he asks of it nothing that only God can give, and claims no right to sit in

judgment over it.

**Respond:** Pick one concrete way to bless your own community this week, and one person — perhaps someone on the other side of an argument — to pray for by name.

**Pray:** Lord, show me how to seek the good of the place where you have planted me — to build, to serve, to bless, and to pray for it — as one whose first allegiance is to you. Amen.

## THURSDAY, July 2 — The Holy Nation

*“You are... a holy nation, a people for his own possession.” — 1 Peter 2:9*

**Read:** 1 Peter 2:9–10; Galatians 3:26–29; Revelation 7:9–10

**Reflect:** Peter takes the grandest titles Israel ever carried — a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s treasured possession — and astonishingly lays them on the church: a scattered, unimpressive gathering of believers from every background who shared nothing in common but Christ. To them, of all people, he says these words now belong.

Sit with that, because it rearranges everything. When Israel’s calling came to its fulfillment in Jesus, it was not passed along to some other country — not to Rome, not to any flag-bearing nation since, and not to the land we hold dear. The people God still claims as his own is no nation at all. It is, instead, his church: borderless and ageless, drawn from every culture on earth — ours included, but never ours alone.

Far from a loss, this is the most freeing news imaginable. To anyone tempted to crown America as a second Israel, Scripture answers gently: it is not — and no country is. Which means our nation was never meant to bear that impossible weight, and neither were we.

**Respond:** Pray today for the church in a land far from your own, and give thanks that God’s holy people stretch across the whole earth.

**Pray:** Father, your holy nation is the family of the Lamb, gathered out of every land. Anchor my belonging there, so I can love my country without asking it to be what only your church can be. Amen.

## FRIDAY, July 3 — Strangers and Pilgrims

*“Our citizenship is in heaven.” — Philippians 3:20*

**Read:** 1 Peter 2:11–12; Philippians 3:20–21; Hebrews 11:13–16

**Reflect:** Right after naming us a holy nation, Peter calls us something else: sojourners and resident aliens — people with a mailing address but no permanent home, citizens of another country living faithfully in this one. Every believer carries a Babylon of some kind; ours simply happens to be a land we love sincerely and well.

And here is the freedom that has slipped through our fingers. The reason we could never get this love right is that we kept asking our country to answer questions it has no power to answer — who we really are, and whether we are in the right. A nation buckles under that load, and our love curdles into fear or into bitterness. But those questions were already settled at the cross, where God spoke our names. In Christ we are fully known and fully accepted before we are anything else at all.

People that secure in their identity can finally loosen their grip. We become free to love our country with clear eyes — rejoicing in all that is genuinely good in it, grieving all that is still broken — holding the two together without panic and without disdain, because we no longer need it to be our god, and no longer appoint ourselves its judge.

**Respond:** Tell your own heart again today: in Christ I am already known and already accepted. Then notice how much more freely your love can flow.

**Pray:** Lord, my true citizenship is in heaven and my life is safe in you. Lift fear and contempt off my heart, that I may love my country with an open and undivided love. Amen.

## SABBATH, July 4 — A Better Country

*“They desire a better country... therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.” — Hebrews 11:16*

**Read:** Hebrews 4:9–11; Hebrews 13:14; Revelation 21:1–4

**Reflect:** This year the nation’s birthday lands on the Sabbath — and the Sabbath may be the quietest act of resistance a citizen can offer. One day in seven we simply stop. We release the work, the effort, the constant anxious labor of holding our world together by ourselves, and we let God carry it instead. Our rest is a weekly confession, made with our own still bodies, that this nation is not our god, and that the world is not held together by our effort.

The Scriptures tell us we are looking for a better homeland, a heavenly one, and waiting for a city whose architect and builder is God. The story does not close with a nation we construct, but with a city that comes down — a new Jerusalem, where God settles in among his people and wipes away every tear. We are not the rescuers of the kingdom; the kingdom is the rescue of us.

So we can give ourselves wholly to today's celebration — precisely because nothing eternal was ever staked on this anniversary, or the next. What we bring our country is neither a possessive love nor an accusing one, but a love finally set free: the generosity of people who already hold a homeland and therefore have plenty left to give — to neighbors, to outsiders, to this good and unfinished land we are honored, for now, to call home.

**Respond:** Receive this Sabbath as a gift of rest. Lay down any sense that the nation's future rests on you, enjoy its birthday with a glad heart, and worship the God who frees you to love it well.

**Pray:** Father, on this Sabbath and this birthday I set my work aside and rest in you. You are my God, and no country could ever be. Teach me to love my land the way you love — by giving rather than grasping — and lead us home at last to the better country you are building. Amen.

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. We started the week by giving thanks for home and country as gifts. What are you genuinely grateful for in your nation and community – and why might thanksgiving be the right place to begin?
2. One distortion treats a country as God's specially chosen possession, fusing loyalty to it with loyalty to God. Where have you seen this, and what makes such a devotion so restless?
3. The opposite distortion can barely bless its country at all, seeing mostly a catalog of faults. How can criticism quietly pass itself off as conscience? Which pull is stronger in you?
4. To exiles in Babylon, God said to pursue the city's flourishing and pray for it. What might it look like to invest wholeheartedly in a flawed country without either idolizing it or condemning it?
5. Peter gives the title "holy nation" to the church rather than to any country. How does it reshape your love of country to know God's people are drawn from every land – yours among them, but never yours alone?
6. If our identity and standing are already settled in Christ, how does that free us to love our country without anxiety and without scorn?
7. Keeping Sabbath quietly declares that our nation is not our god. With the Fourth of July falling on the Sabbath this year, how might you come to it rested, free, and generous rather than anxious?