

RIVER *Flow*

Seven Days of Devotional Practice

July 19 – 25, 2026

ABIDING IN JESUS SERIES, PART 2

The Look on His Face

A Note Before You Sit

This Sabbath, July 18, we said something in church that I want to put in your hands for the week: that presence, in the Bible's own vocabulary, is a face. The Hebrew word for presence, *panim*, is also the word for face. To be in God's presence is to have his face turned toward you. To feel his absence is to feel a face turned away.

And that changes what prayer is for.

Most of us learned to pray the way you'd file a request. Assemble the words, send them up, hope they land. It is a good and biblical thing to do and I am not asking you to stop. But there is something else the church knew how to do for fifteen hundred years and largely forgot, and it is much simpler than what we replaced it with: sit still, say nothing, and let yourself be looked at by Someone who is glad you came.

That's what this week is. Seven days, seven short readings, and seven two-minute silences.

Two minutes. That's all I'm asking. It will feel like a long time, and that itself will teach you something.

You'll notice each day ends in a section called Stay — and that it comes after the prayer, not before. That's deliberate. The prayer is you talking. Staying is what you do afterward instead of hanging up. It's the same word Jesus uses in John 15, in plain English: the branch

doesn't strain, it just stays.

You will be bad at it. Everyone is bad at it. Being bad at it is not a sign that it isn't working; it is the first thing that happens to everyone who has ever tried this, in every century, and there is a whole literature written by people reassuring each other about it. I'll introduce you to a few of them this week.

Read slowly. One day at a time. Don't skip ahead, and don't make up the two you missed.

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

Daily Devotional Guide

SUNDAY, July 19 — Philip's Question

"Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." — John 14:8

Read: John 14:8–11; 2 Corinthians 4:5–7

Reflect: Philip had been walking with Jesus for roughly three years. He had watched him touch lepers, feed crowds, weep at a grave. And on the last night, in the upper room, he says: show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.

He wanted a demonstration. Something conclusive.

And Jesus answers with a sentence that has some sadness in it: Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?

Philip had the face standing eighteen inches in front of him and was asking for a slide show.

Sit with that today, because it's not really about Philip. Most of us are asking God for a demonstration that would settle it — some proof, some experience, some breakthrough — while the thing we're asking for has already been given. Paul says it plainly: the light of the knowledge of the glory of God is in the face of Jesus Christ. Not in an argument. Not in a sign. In a face.

You are not waiting for God to reveal himself. You are learning to look at what he already did.

Notice: How much of your life with God has been spent waiting for a demonstration? Don't answer that. Don't fix it. Just let the question sit there today and see what it stirs.

Pray: Jesus, I have asked for so much proof. Today let me stop asking and start looking. Amen.

Stay: Set a timer for two minutes. Close your eyes. Bring one scene from the Gospels where you can see how Jesus looked at somebody — the woman with the stones around her, Zacchaeus in the tree, the leper, Peter after the rooster. Just one, and keep the same one all week. Don't study it. Say nothing, ask for nothing. Let him look at you. Your mind will wander in about forty seconds. That's normal. Come back.

MONDAY, July 20 — Put My Name on Them

"The LORD make his face to shine upon you." — Numbers 6:25

Read: Numbers 6:22–27; Psalm 27:7–9

Reflect: God gave Aaron three lines to say over the people, and every one of them is about a face turned toward you. Bless and keep. Make his face shine. Lift up his countenance. Then he adds a line we tend to read straight past: So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

Put my name on them.

That's what the blessing does. It doesn't request God's attention; it announces it. It marks a people as looked-at.

And notice what the middle line is actually asking. Make his face shine is not a request for information. It's a request for a face to light up. It's what happens across a room when someone who loves you sees you come in.

Israel wore that blessing. It is the oldest fragment of Scripture ever pulled out of the ground.

Now hear the Psalmist, and notice who speaks first: "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, LORD, do I seek. His heart said it before he did. Something in him was already turned toward the light.

That something is in you too. It's why you're reading this.

Notice: What happens in you at the thought of God's face lighting up at you — not at the world, not at the church, at you? Embarrassment? Doubt? Something loosening? Whatever it is, don't argue with it. Just watch it.

Pray: Lord, you told your priests to put your name on your people. Put it on me. Amen.

Stay: Say the blessing out loud over yourself first, slowly, in the second person — The LORD make his face to shine upon me. It will feel presumptuous. Say it anyway. Then stop talking. Timer, two minutes, eyes closed. Don't work at picturing anything today. Just sit as someone being blessed — as if the words were still being said over you by someone standing behind you. You don't have to do anything to receive a blessing. That's what makes it one.

Notes

TUESDAY, July 21 — He Can Be Loved, But Not Thought

"Anyone who loves God is known by him." — 1 Corinthians 8:3

Read: 1 Corinthians 8:1–3

Reflect: Sometime in the 1300s, in England, an unknown monk wrote a letter to a young man who wanted to pray and couldn't. He never signed it. We've called it *The Cloud of Unknowing* for six hundred years.

Understand when he wrote. The plague had come through England and killed something close to half the country. This is not a man with a comfortable life advising us to relax.

To a young man who was straining and analyzing and getting nowhere, he wrote: He can be loved, but not thought.

Not don't think. This man could think circles around most of us. He means: thinking is the wrong instrument for this particular job. You cannot think your way into being loved by someone. You can only show up.

And Paul is doing something similar in this passage, if you slow down enough to catch it. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Then:

anyone who loves God — and here you expect knows him. That's the sentence we'd write.

Paul writes the opposite. Is known by him.

Love doesn't get you information about God. Love gets you seen.

Gregory the Great said it in the sixth century and the church repeated it for a thousand years: amor ipse notitia est. Love itself is a kind of knowing.

Notice: Listen to yourself pray today — the ordinary, over-the-sink kind. How much of it is assembling? Explaining? Building a case? Not to shame yourself. Most of us were never taught anything else. Just hear it.

Pray: Father, I have tried to think my way to you for years. Today I would rather be known. Amen.

Stay: Timer, two minutes, eyes closed. Today's instruction is one line, and it's harder than it sounds: don't think about him. Just be with him. When you catch yourself constructing a thought about God — analyzing, explaining, preparing a remark — let it go and come back to your scene. You'll do it many times. That's fine.

Notes

WEDNESDAY, July 22 — The Speech He Never Got to Finish

"He will exult over you with loud singing." — Zephaniah 3:17

Read: Luke 15:17-24; Zephaniah 3:14-17

Reflect: The son had a speech. He'd written it in a pig field and rehearsed it the whole way home. Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.

It's a good speech. Accurate, even.

He never finished it.

While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Read that again and watch the order. The father saw him. Before the speech. Before the confession. Before one word of the material the boy had prepared. The whole transaction happened across a distance, through a face, before anybody said anything.

Brain science has a word for what that boy felt on the road, and the definition is simpler than you'd expect. Joy is knowing that somebody is glad to be with you. That's it. Not happiness. Not good circumstances. A face that lights up because you walked in.

Now read Zephaniah — a minor prophet, in the middle of a book about judgment, and this comes out of nowhere: he will rejoice over you with gladness... he will exult over you with loud singing.

Over you. Out loud.

You have been preparing a speech your whole life. He has been watching the road.

Notice: Do you believe God is glad to be with you? Not that he tolerates you, or is committed to you, or has decided to put up with you. Glad. Ask it once and then watch what rises up in answer. Whatever comes — that's worth knowing about yourself.

Pray: Father, you saw me while I was still far off. I don't have to explain myself to you today. Amen.

Stay: Timer, two minutes, eyes closed. Bring your scene. Today look for one thing only: the gladness. Is that face glad you're there? Don't argue about whether you deserve it — that's the speech again. Just look.

Notes

THURSDAY, July 23 — The Day You Feel Nothing

"Truly, you are a God who hides himself." — Isaiah 45:15

Read: Psalm 13; Isaiah 45:15

Reflect: By now some of you have had one. A sit where nothing happened. No warmth, no sense of anything, two minutes of a blank ceiling and a wandering mind, and you got up feeling like a fraud.

Good. Let's talk about that, because it's the day most people quit.

Here's what you need to know, and it comes from people who did this for fifty years. Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk who taught this prayer to more people than anyone in the last century, insisted on two things. First: the fruits of this prayer are experienced in daily life, not during the prayer period. You are not supposed to be able to tell how it went. Second: this is not about the felt presence of God — it is a deepening of faith in God's abiding presence.

Which is what we said the first Sabbath of this series. He is already abiding in you. Your feelings are not the instrument that detects that.

Now look at Psalm 13. How long will you hide your face from me? That's verse 1. Real desolation, no varnish on it.

Four verses later, same psalm, same man: I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

He didn't get an answer in between. He got through it by staying in the room.

Notice: Notice the urge to grade this week. To decide whether it's working. To quit, or to try harder, which are the same impulse wearing different clothes. Don't obey it and don't fight it. Just see that it's there.

Pray: Lord, I would rather feel you. But I am not here for a feeling. I'm here for you. Amen.

Stay: Timer, two minutes, eyes closed. Especially today. Especially if nothing happened yesterday. Don't fix it, don't diagnose it, don't make up for it. You are not grading this. Sit there like a branch, which has no idea whether the sap is running and stays on the vine regardless.

FRIDAY, July 24 — The Returning Is the Prayer

"Return, O my soul, to your rest." — Psalm 116:7

Read: Psalm 116:1–7

Reflect: Around the year 1000, a Greek monk named Simeon the New Theologian wrote down three ways people try to pray, and why two of them fail.

The second one is ours. He calls it collecting your thoughts — examining yourself, monitoring how you're doing, watching your own performance. And Simeon says it fails for a devastating reason: the man stays in his head, while everything that matters is happening somewhere else. He ends up making a religion out of his better moments.

The third way Simeon calls attention of the heart. And his definition of it stopped me cold. It's freedom from all cares — not only about bad and vain things, but even about good ones.

Even the good ones. Even how the prayer is going.

So here's the thing nobody tells you. When you sit down and your mind wanders — and it wanders, constantly, for everyone, forever — that is not the failure. That's the raw material.

The unknown monk who wrote *The Cloud* told his young friend to take a little word of one syllable and fasten it to his heart, and when the mind ran off, to come back to it. Keating said the word should be introduced as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton. Gently. A minimum of effort. Not a whip.

You'll wander two hundred times in two minutes. Every single return is the prayer. The returning is the abiding.

Notice: Listen to the tone of voice you use on yourself when your mind wanders. Is there a scold in it? An eye-roll? Somebody taught you that voice. It isn't his.

Pray: Lord, I will lose you a hundred times in the next two minutes. Thank you for waiting each time. Amen.

Stay: First, pick one word. Jesus. Abba. Here. Whatever's yours. It isn't magic and it isn't a mantra — it's just something small to hold so you have somewhere to come back to. Then timer, two minutes, eyes closed. Your scene, your word. When you catch yourself wondering how am I doing — notice that this is the exact thing Simeon warned about — come back. Gently. Feather on cotton. No scolding.

Notes

SABBATH, July 25 — It Doesn't Stop With You

"Love one another as I have loved you." — John 15:12

Read: John 15:9-12

Reflect: Watch one small word do all the work in this passage. As. In Greek, *kathōs* — in the very same manner.

Abide in me as I in you (v. 4). As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you (v. 9). Love one another as I have loved you (v. 12).

Follow the chain. The love the Father has for the Son — that love, going on before there was a galaxy — doesn't stop at the Son. It comes through him to you. And it doesn't stop at you either.

It isn't three loves. It's one love, moving, unchanged in kind, all the way down.

Which means Jesus never said abide in me and produce some love. He said abide in my love. In it. Like a room. You aren't the source. You were never asked to be the source.

And here's the test, on this Sabbath, of whether anything happened this week.

It isn't whether your two minutes felt holy.

It's whether you were gentler on Tuesday afternoon. Whether somebody irritating got a little more room from you than usual. Whether you noticed a face this week that you'd have walked past a month ago.

That's where it shows up. Not in the sitting. In the twelve hours afterward.

A branch never sees its own fruit. Somebody else eats it.

Notice: Look back over the week. Where did something come out of you that you didn't manufacture — a patience you didn't work up, a softness that surprised you? You may find nothing, and that's all right; it's been six days. But look.

Pray: Father, I am not the source. Let the love that has been coming into me this week go somewhere today. Amen.

Stay: Timer, two minutes, eyes closed — longer today if you want. It's Sabbath, and there's no hurry. Sit under that face. And then get up and go find somebody to be glad about.

Notes

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Philip walked with Jesus for three years and still asked for a demonstration. What demonstration have you been quietly waiting on from God — and what might it mean that the answer has already been given?
2. Presence, in Hebrew, is a face. Does your felt sense of God have a face at all, or is it more of an idea? Be honest about the difference.
3. Paul writes that anyone who loves God is known by him — not knows him. Why do you think we so consistently reverse that sentence?
4. The father saw the son while he was still far off, before the speech. What speech have you been rehearsing for God — and what would it cost you to let him interrupt it?
5. Joy, in the brain, means somebody is glad to be with me. Do you believe God is glad to be with you? What in your history makes that hard to receive?
6. Simeon said the danger is staying in your head and “making a religion of your better moments.” Where do you see that in yourself?
7. Which was harder this week — the two minutes, or admitting how hard the two minutes were? What did that reveal?

Notes