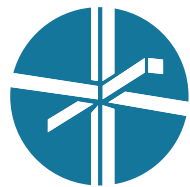


7-DAY DEVOTIONAL

WRITTEN BY REV. JASON SURDY



LAKE TRAVIS
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ROMANS 1: 1-3a

“This letter is from Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, chosen by God to be an apostle and sent out to preach his Good News. God promised this Good News long ago through his prophets in the holy Scriptures. The Good News is about his Son.”

Myself and two of my best friends, Byron and Jamie (above), spent five days in the Eastern Sierra Mountains, most of it in the John Muir Wilderness. It was grueling, beautiful, tiresome, uplifting, demanding and amazing — all at the same time. I believe the trip itself, in so many ways, mirrors our life’s journey: Ups and downs, struggles and success, pain and joy ... all part of the human experience.

One of my goals during that trip (other than to simply survive it!) was to begin the process of reconnecting with a God whom I felt I was losing my connection.

After many miles, many hours of silence, and many questions, I didn’t get any profound or otherworldly answers. I didn’t have an epiphany nor was I visited by angels. I didn’t get a checklist or a bunch of books to read or a structured bible study, nor did I get to speak to a burning bush (which, by the way, was a bit disappointing).

But I did get my answer ... and it was simple. The answer was: “Jason, I’m right here. Just spend more time with me.” In other words ... remain in me.

Overly simplistic? Many would think so, and you may too. But don’t we often

over-complicate our faith? Jesus didn’t ask us to do that. In the Gospel of John, he says “This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6:29 NLT). And part of that belief, that faith, is wanting to spend time in the Scriptures, in prayer, and in God’s Creation, all the while listening to what the Lord has to say.

Over the next seven days I will share with you my (very) amateur attempts at photography along with some reflections and/or some interesting tidbits about what we saw and experienced. More importantly, I’ll do my best to share and connect you to the Good News that Paul wrote about in his introduction to his letter to the Romans — the Good News that is Christ Jesus—so that you can spend more time with him too.

I pray that in some small way this devotional speaks to you and brings you closer to the awesome, merciful, and compassionate God who loves us more deeply than we could ever imagine.

Shalom.

Rev. Jason Surdy
July 2026

MARK 16: 1-6

“Saturday evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went out and purchased burial spices so they could anoint Jesus’ body. Very early on Sunday morning, just at sunrise, they went to the tomb. On the way they were asking each other, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” But as they arrived, they looked up and saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled aside.

When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side. The women were shocked, but the angel said, “Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn’t here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body.”

I took this picture on our way to the Big Pine Lakes. At first, I was trying to get a good picture of the rockslide that was dominating the landscape. Millions of tons of rock had come loose and fallen down the slope. I thought, “wow, wouldn’t it have been so awesome to witness that actually happen?” (from a safe distance, of course)

But then as I zoomed in, I saw it ... an opening in the side of the mountain (center of picture). And notice — there is no stone blocking it ... the stone had been rolled away! You can probably guess where this is headed ...

As I write this, I can’t ignore the irony of what I said about the rockslide — wouldn’t it have been so awesome to witness the Resurrection actually happen? Bucket list!

You may think it strange that I started this 7-day journey with the Resurrection. We often think about that empty tomb as the culmination of things, but I like to think of it as the foundation of things — the foundation for the hope we have in Christ Jesus. Hope not only in what lies beyond this life but hope for the life we have right now.

When we think of resurrection, we usually think of eternal life, i.e. in Heaven. But the concept of eternal life to those hearing Jesus preach was not as simple as our

Christian understanding of it. Yes, it included victory over death, but it was much more complex than that. It meant participating in the coming Kingdom of God right now, it meant flourishing right now by living into God’s blessings, it meant knowing God and participating in a restored, faithful relationship with Him right now.

We don’t need to die a biological death to experience resurrection.

What in your life needs resurrecting? Your faith, a relationship, the ability to love your neighbor, hope for the future? Whatever it is, know that the One who conquered sin and death can help you bring it back to life.



LUKE 6: 43-45

“A good tree can’t produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can’t produce good fruit. A tree is identified by its fruit. Figs are never gathered from thornbushes, and grapes are not picked from bramble bushes. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. What you say flows from what is in your heart.”

I took this on our last night in the Eastern Sierras. Ugh — we were so tired. We had actually stopped short of our goal for the night. Our spirits were willing, but our bodies were weak! A 38-lb pack is easy when you’re 25, but when you’re 55 it makes you question your sanity.

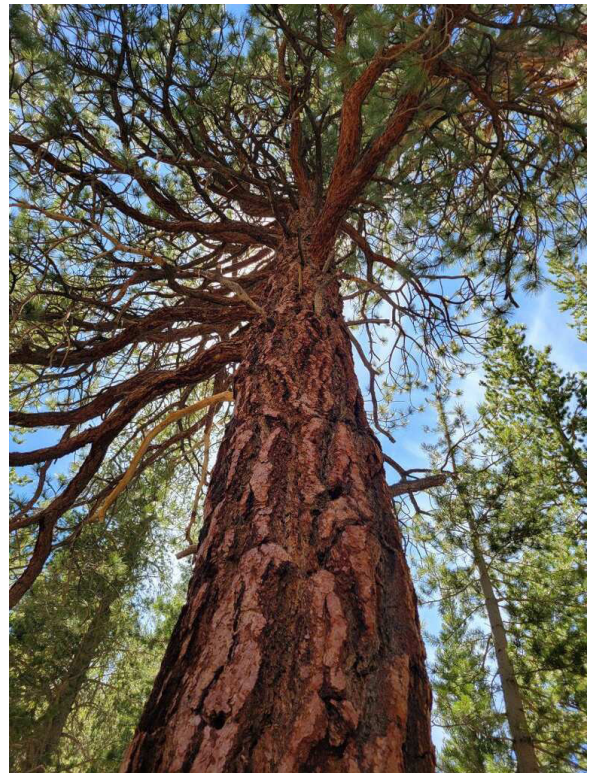
Anyhow, this is a Jeffery Pine (*Pinus jeffreyi*). It looks a lot like its more famous cousin, the Ponderosa pine. One way you can tell the difference between them is the shape of their cones. Now, if you’ve ever grabbed a pinecone, you may have gotten a surprise when you got a handful of barbs. However, a big difference between a Jeffery pine and a Ponderosa pine is that the Jeffery pine’s barbs point inward, so they feel smooth in the palm of your hand ... but the Ponderosa’s barbs point outward, so they feel sharp and prickly when picked up.

Another cool thing about the Jeffery pine is that it has a life span of 400-600 years, with some living as long as 800 years. And to make more Jefferys we know they drop their cones, which contain the seeds needed for new growth, i.e. new ‘fruit’.

In all those years, how many other Jeffery pines have there been in the world because of this one pine tree? In other words, how much ‘fruit’ has this tree

produced in the centuries it has been in existence?

So, this leads me to two questions: One is this — we all bear fruit of some kind, so is the fruit you bear smooth or prickly? The other — how many ‘seeds’ have you dropped that have led someone into relationship with Christ?



MARK 15: 16-20

“The soldiers took Jesus into the courtyard of the governor’s headquarters (called the Praetorium) and called out the entire regiment. They dressed him in a purple robe, and they wove thorn branches into a crown and put it on his head. Then they saluted him and taunted, “Hail! King of the Jews!” And they struck him on the head with a reed stick, spit on him, and dropped to their knees in mock worship. When they were finally tired of mocking him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him again. Then they led him away to be crucified.”

The Eastern Sierra Nevada range is known for its dazzling peaks and a diverse, breathtaking landscape. Unfortunately, it’s also known for steep slopes and brutal climbs; I think that’s what they mean by breathtaking!

Scientists believe the range was created starting about 5 million years ago. The granite that you see, however, formed underground approximately 100-130 million years ago. Then, through tectonic forces, which includes the infamous San Andreas fault system, the granite began to be pushed upward, eventually giving us the mountains we see today.

When I sit and take in the magnificence of these peaks, it gives me perspective. I am reminded there is a bigger picture which extends well beyond our time on this earth. There is something more at play that we don’t comprehend. A plan God has for His Kingdom.

Jesus understood that there was something bigger at play as he suffered on that Good Friday. As the Son of God, he could have at any time called down Heaven’s armies and freed himself from the guards who mocked and tortured him. But he didn’t — instead he was “obedient, even unto death on a cross” because Jesus understood that God’s ways were bigger, more expansive, and ultimately for the best.

Jesus also understood the role that he played in God’s plan — a role that echoes

through eternity.

Even though we play a much smaller role than Jesus, we also have a role in God’s plan. And to properly play our role in the coming Kingdom, we are called to be obedient to God’s ways ... because our ways just won’t cut it. And when we’re obedient, that too can echo throughout the generations and help bring about God’s Kingdom.

Where in your life can you be more obedient to God’s ways?



JOHN 4: 11-14

“But sir, you don’t have a rope or a bucket,” she said, “and this well is very deep. Where would you get this living water? And besides, do you think you’re greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?”

Jesus replied, “Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life.”

This is part of the North Fork of Big Pine Creek, which is just over 12 miles long. We spent the better part of day hiking alongside it and eventually made camp for a night right next to the creek. Two things stood out to me. One was the sound — it was actually so loud we had to sit close to each other to hear each other speak. This doesn’t sound like a big deal, but none of us had bathed in a couple of days, so ...

Anyhow, the other thing was the sheer volume of water that passed by us. It never ceased, it never slowed, the water just kept flowing — thousands upon thousands of gallons every single minute of every hour of every day.

To me, that water is a microcosm of God’s grace. (I say microcosm because the breadth and depth of His grace is incomprehensible.)

Which means no matter how badly I stumble, no matter how many mistakes I continue to make, no matter how many times I fall short, no matter how severely the world judges me ... His grace pours down on me like a raging river—never ceasing, never slowing. It is an endless well of love and mercy and forgiveness that is available to all who believe.

I say all that to say this: Don’t let your failures define you ... because that is not how Jesus defines you.

In this famous story of the Woman at the Well, Jesus breaks all kinds of rules, ignoring what society thinks is right and wrong. He, as Jew, speaks to a Samaritan (scandalous!). He, as a man, speaks to a woman when she is alone (even more scandalous!). On top of all that, this woman has been through five husbands and is working on her sixth — she was an outcast among outcasts. But Jesus doesn’t condemn

her. Instead, he offers her redemption. And it changed her life forever.

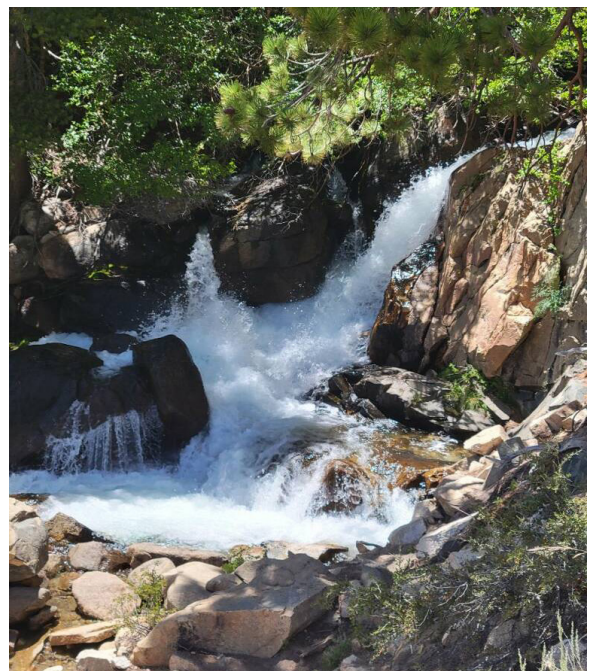
Later in John, chapter 7, he writes:

³⁷On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! ³⁸Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’”

What a beautiful image — Jesus’ love pouring out of his heart and upon you!

Jesus offers you this Living Water every day, cleansing your sins and making you a new creation.

When was the last time you took a drink? When was the last time you offered that same drink to someone else?



JOHN 15: 1-4

“I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.”

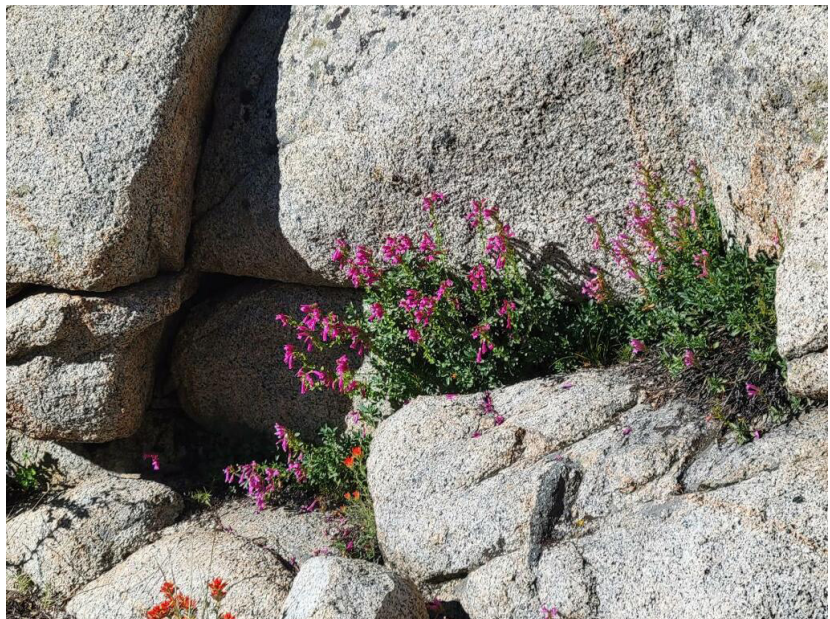
This is Newberry’s Penstemon (Penstemon newberryi). It is one of the signature wildflowers of the Sierra Nevada. I took this photo near Blue Lake at an elevation of over 10,500 feet. Notice it’s growing seemingly right out of a rock! How can this plant flourish in a place where it endures intense sunlight (at 2 miles up!), freezing temperatures, dry winds, long periods of drought, and rocky soil?

It’s because of its root system. The roots work their way into tiny cracks in the granite, which does two things: it anchors the plant and it allows the plant to access moisture other plants can’t reach. It has learned where to draw its life from and it remains connected to that life-giving source. That’s why it thrives all throughout the harsh conditions of the Sierra Nevada mountains.

In our Scripture today, Jesus is clear — if we want to live and bear fruit and thrive (regardless of our circumstances), we too must know where to draw life from ... and we too must remain connected to that life-giving source — Jesus himself!

When we anchor ourselves in Christ it allows us access to that which helps us endure even the most difficult conditions — God’s infinite mercy and grace.

When life becomes challenging, when conditions are less-than-perfect, when flourishing doesn’t seem possible—where do you draw sustenance and strength? Are you connected to him, the True Vine? Do your faith roots run deep? Are you anchored in the Good News?



MATTHEW 4: 23-25

“Jesus traveled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. News about him spread as far as Syria, and people soon began bringing to him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon possessed or epileptic or paralyzed — he healed them all. Large crowds followed him wherever he went — people from Galilee, the Ten Towns, Jerusalem, from all over Judea, and from east of the Jordan River.

This is a flower called Wood’s Rose. I took this picture at a creek by our campsite near the Mt. Whitney Portal. These flowers are rich in Vitamin C and provide nourishment for birds, bears, deer, and other wildlife. They were also used by many Native American tribes for tea and winter nutrition. But the rose was also used by these tribes for one more thing — medicine. Turns out, Wood’s Rose has many healing properties, including anti-inflammatory, digestive help, pain relief, wound care, and respiratory support. The good news is (pun intended) we didn’t need to whip up a batch on our trip — that’s what 800 mg of ibuprofen is for!

So, as part of my sabbatical, I did something I had never done before — I read the Gospels back-to-back-to-back-to-back (first Mark, then Luke, Matthew, and John, in that order). I finished one each day and then let it marinate overnight before delving into the next one.

One of the many striking things you (re)learn is how much time Jesus spent healing the people.

Physical, mental, and spiritual healing to anyone who showed up. Over and over again people would come by the dozens, hundreds, even thousands to hear him

teach and to be healed—and he didn’t turn them away. Ever. Because he came to heal our brokenness, in whatever form it may present itself.

[As always, a caveat when it comes to healing: that healing may not look like you think it will, and it may not be the way you want, but Jesus will heal you nonetheless.]

Where do you need healing in your life? What physical, mental, or spiritual malady weighs heavy on you? Come to Jesus, ask him to heal you, and he will never turn you away.



MATTHEW 11: 28-30

“Then Jesus said, ‘Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.’”

This is a picture of Blue Lake. It sits high in the Eastern Sierra Mountains at about 10,500 feet. After spending our first night acclimating at about 8,800 feet, we made it up here on our second night. Pro Tip: If you ever make it here, bring a mosquito net and bug spray. You'll thank me later.

But what I remember most about this spot was the absolute serenity — no sounds other than what nature provided. No cell phone service, no traffic sounds, no people...just peacefulness. It had been what I had come to find, what I had been in desperate search of. I felt as if I had made it home.

However, eventually we had to move on. We had other places to travel to, other sights to see, and I could not take that feeling with me.

And what that taught me is that peace, true peace, isn't about a place or an atmosphere or even a personal feeling. It's about being in Christ. That is a peace that doesn't require a trip to the mountains (or anywhere else for that matter). It is a peace that doesn't have anything to do with where you are, or what's going on in your life, or who you are with. It is a peace for your soul that goes with you wherever you are — knowing without a doubt that you rest in the arms of our dear Savior.

What burden are you carrying that you no longer need to carry? Does your soul need rest? Where do you need peace in your life?

Our Savior offers us a peace that passes all understanding. All we have to do is come to him.

Shalom.

