

DEVOTIONS

by Surita Swanepoel

WEEK 1: I Spy with My Little Eye

“... to liberate those tied down and held back by injustice, to lighten the load of those heavily burdened, to free the oppressed and shatter every type of oppression.” (Isaiah 58:6, VOICE translation)

While my husband was still a full-time pastor, we had the privilege of taking many people from our church on trips to the Middle East. The two of us have a wonderful Aaron-Moses personality combination: he loves being around people and people love being around him, whereas I love to make sure every detail is in place for things to run smoothly.

Even today, I can remember the absolutely serene feeling that came over me when we got a group of 44 people on a ‘Jesus boat’ on the Sea of Galilee and I knew that for the next 90 minutes there would be no need for logistics and counting people – pure bliss! While everybody was busy with some quiet time, I let my eyes glide over the shores of the Kinnereth and had a deep yearning to see what Jesus must have seen when He was wading the shores or sailing across the waters. I lifted my eyes to the horizon and thought to myself that Jesus surely looked at the same surrounding hills and mountains of the Golan Heights. Suddenly the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart, telling me that every day I see the same things Jesus saw: people who are without hope, people who are marginalised, people who are sick, people who worry ... people who all need Him!

He reminded me that I deliberately need to take my mind off all my planning and focused concentration and look into the eyes of these people, because Jesus always deliberately stopped what He was busy doing to touch the lives of those who needed God’s grace and mercy.

“Wherever you are, be all there! Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God.” - Jim Elliot

WEEK 2: Peekaboo

“So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:18, NIV)

Sometimes you hear people sharing wonderful stories from their lives and examples of God speaking or working, and although it hits home, you unfortunately forget them (and the accompanying lesson) way too soon. Then there are other times where you are continually reminded of those special treasures you heard along the way ... like I was this morning!

When I was backing out of the driveway on my way to the INcontext office, I almost couldn't see through one of the rear passenger windows. The sun's rays were shining into the car at just the right angle, and to my horror, all I could see was my children's fingerprints ALL over the window. For a nanosecond, I wondered how on earth they had managed to get their hands all over the windows while being strapped into their seats (and without me noticing!). My next thought went to a lesson a man once shared at our church a couple of years ago.

He told us that sometimes when he was driving alone, he could see his children's fingerprints all over the windows. These fingerprints were evidence that his children had been in the car previously, and that they have been busy doing something to the windows (with him unaware of it most of the time).

He went on to say that if we allow God's light (the sun's rays) into our lives (the car's windows), we will be able to see God's 'fingerprints' in our own circumstances. This is evidence that He has been at work, maybe without us even noticing it.

I always stand amazed at the detail of God's work! May you also be amazed and thankful for the 'fingerprints' you see in your life, and may we be obedient when we're invited to assist God when He's leaving 'fingerprints' in the lives of others. I hope that you will always see fingerprints on your windows, mirrors or computer screens in a different way, and remember this!

“Leave it all in the hands that were wounded for you.” - Elisabeth Elliot

WEEK 3: Pitching Pennies

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:21, NIV)

A couple of years ago, my husband and I attended a mission conference in Asia for a few days. At that point, we had never travelled abroad with our two small children, but we began considering it for the first time. We prayed, we asked for advice and guidance from friends and colleagues, but we had to make a decision in a (much too!) short space of time and it felt as if the answer evaded us. Some people encouraged us to take them, while others said we should rather wait until they were older so that we could get a bigger 'return on investment' (so to speak). There were so many things to consider: the logistics, the necessary paperwork when travelling with minors, the vaccines and, of course, the costs involved. Sometimes it felt like our 'living-in-faith purse' was stretched if one of us had to travel, and now we had to trust the Lord for the entire family if we decided to take the kids with us ... this was a bit outside our comfort zone!

One Sunday at church, I was wrestling with the Lord about what we should do as we were running out of time, and it suddenly felt as if His answer pressed all the breath out of me. *Are you willing to invest in your children's spiritual life ... are you willing to take a (financial) risk to expose them to My work?*

I then realised that as parents, we make an effort to invest in our children's lives by looking for the best possible tuition, taking them to extra-murals, helping to develop their strengths and trying to work through and overcome their weaknesses ... BUT how much effort are we putting into their understanding of the Lord? How much are we willing to 'invest' in their spiritual lives?

The same goes for other people around us in whose lives we have a position of influence: are we only helping them to grow as a person in the present, or are we also investing in their spiritual lives?

"Far too many parents are more invested in their kids making the team than they are invested in their kids making the kingdom." - Focus on the Family

WEEK 4: Follow the Leader

“For [you seem willing to allow it] if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted. You tolerate all this beautifully [welcoming the deception].” (2 Corinthians 11:4, Amplified)

A month ago, one of our pastors asked us if we knew that you can get personalised shampoo ... yup, you read correctly: your own mix of ingredients to get your own tailor-made special shampoo. He said that because we live in an era when we can personalise almost everything, we also run the risk of ‘personalising’ Jesus Christ. We run the risk of imagining a Jesus who fits our opinions and views, who condones our way of handling our personal and business affairs and finances, and who endorses a “#blessed” lifestyle of showcasing our blessings (i.e. super-clever kids, new cars and houses, accomplishments, etc.) on social media. We run the risk of serving a figment of our imagination who is not the Jesus Christ of the Bible.

One day, between the third and the fourth floors of an apartment building in the Middle East, I was struggling to grasp the difference between the lifestyle of Christians in the Middle East and that of Christians in Western countries. I was confronted there by people who gave everything for the sake of others, who trusted the Lord wholeheartedly and who were willing to die so that others may see eternity with Christ. They lived humble, sacrificial lives and it made such a big impression on me to see non-believers starting to ask questions about Christ because they had seen a different way of living in these fellow brothers and sisters. One lady even said to a friend of ours: “I can’t believe it! When you Christians differ in opinion, you do it in love!”

Let’s not be modern-day Jeroboams (see 1 Kings 12:28-33) who devise a religion according to our own taste, but rather put our own faith under the magnifying glass to see whether the Jesus who we follow is actually the Jesus Christ of the Bible.

“If your god never disagrees with you, you might just be worshipping an idealised version of yourself.” - Timothy Keller

WEEK 5: Jump the River

“Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.” (Romans 12:2, NLT)

While driving through the United States on a short visit, I found myself liking and disliking different houses as we passed through many streets. I would decide on my ‘top five’ in a neighbourhood and could imagine myself living in any of them if I was a millionaire (well, I’d probably need to be a billionaire!). It’s then that it struck me: I was having unrealistic daydreams about a nice and comfortable life and I was ‘floating further down the river’.

I then thought about a young Western family that we met in the Middle East. They had made the intentional decision to live there and to reach out to their neighbours, other parents at the government school, and the shop owners at the local market with the love of Christ. They said to us that life was like a river, and if you don’t deliberately choose to jump out of the river, the current will take you and wash you out to sea.

When preacher Francis Chan announced in 2010 that he would be resigning from the megachurch he and his wife had founded in 1994, a congregation member challenged him: “Why would you leave? Everything is going so well right now!” Chan answered: “That’s why, that’s it.” He said that they as a family felt that they were just too comfortable with their lives. They felt they had to step out in faith and be led by the Holy Spirit, because “why do we need the Comforter when we’re already comfortable?”

The world and media want us to long for things that don’t please God – they want us to struggle to secure our own comfort and safety and sometimes we have to suffer just to keep the status quo. Many a time our comforts come at the expense of the Kingdom. May we get uncomfortable with comfort, may we get dissatisfied with living easy lives and may we act on the pull of God, so that we can jump out of life’s river and escape the current.

“Yes, you must live life beautifully and not allow the spirit of the world that makes gods out of power, riches, and pleasure make you forget that you have been created for greater things.” - Mother Theresa

WEEK 6: Rotten Egg

"Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, NLT)

While on a trip abroad, I was so frustrated and upset when I realised my daughter had lice in her hair. I couldn't get over the fact that while the team had fellowship and were visiting new places and people, I had to spend hours combing my way through strands of hair in a small hotel bathroom, while my poor child had a rash thanks to the unfamiliar chemicals we used. It wasn't so much the vermin that got to me (although I despise them), but oh man, the timing was just wrong and I would rather face obstacles in the comfort of familiar surroundings! This hadn't been part of my planning and I was really upset.

Three days later, I was so excited when my very own copy of Corrie ten Boom's book *The Hiding Place* was delivered to the hotel. She is probably my biggest hero of faith and this book left an impression on me that I can't put into words. When I was standing with the book in my hand, opening the door to our room, I suddenly felt so ashamed. I realised that I'm always telling other people about the wonderful lessons God showed Corrie through her suffering and hardships, but when it came to my own, I had failed to see God and follow His instructions.

One of Corrie's lessons that always stands out for me is when she and her sister, Betsie, were taken to a concentration camp during WWII. She was appalled by their new living conditions – the cramped living quarters, the filthy blankets and mattresses and the lice were unbearable to her. Betsie, however, told her that she must thank God for everything, even the lice. But Corrie struggled to thank God for everything and in all circumstances ... including the lice. Months later, they realised that the female Nazi guards never entered Corrie and Betsie's barracks because they wanted to stay clear of the lice – the lice had made it possible for them to have Bible studies without fear, and many ladies had turned to the Lord!

Funny how it took lice to remind me of a precious command we're given in His Word ... be thankful in all circumstances. Our circumstances should not affect and direct us, because God is always in control and He can even use the worst circumstances to further His Kingdom.

"Give thanks in all circumstances' ... it doesn't say 'in pleasant circumstances'." - Corrie ten Boom

WEEK 7: Watch Ya' Mouth!

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves." (Philippians 2:3, NIV)

Our ministry team had the opportunity to have some quiet time in a beautiful wooden chapel on a farm at the foot of a mountain just more than a year ago. We were led in praise and worship and could sit quietly to talk to the Lord. Upon leaving, you could light a candle at the back of the chapel and there was the most beautiful and intricate wood carving of the Last Supper against the wall where you could take communion before you exited.

I felt so close to God and I remember standing there, hoping and wishing the Lord would have some 'special words of wisdom' for me while I was lighting a candle ... but nothing came to me. After taking communion, I bowed my head to pray when my eyes caught a bright red fire extinguisher in the corner just to the left of me ... and then the words came clearly: *"Don't be the fire extinguisher!"*

I immediately thought of something one of our dear friends who used to live in the Middle East had shared with us. It was the story in 1 Samuel 1, where we read that Elkanah took his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah, to Shiloh every year to worship and sacrifice to the Lord. I am sure they were all excited to go on this special trip. Unfortunately, Peninnah behaved in a way that had Hannah crying and with no appetite every time. I don't know if she was even able to praise and worship the Lord, because of the state she was in.

Our friend told us that we, as Christians, need to be extra careful with our words and our actions, because sometimes we can be the 'Peninnahs' who might keep other 'Hannahs' from seeking and worshiping the Lord because of the way we make them feel. May we be kind and loving to all – looking for opportunities to show God's love and extend grace and forgiveness where needed – and may we not be fire extinguishers who snuff out the flames of others around us.

"Wherever God has put you, that is your vocation. It is not what we do but how much love we put into it." - Mother Theresa

WEEK 8: Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire

“When you make a vow to the Lord your God, be prompt in fulfilling whatever you promised Him. For the Lord your God demands that you promptly fulfil all your vows, or you will be guilty of sin.” (Deuteronomy 24:21, NLT)

Not too long ago, I was reading through 2 Samuel 21 and a couple of commentaries helped me to understand why David had to hand over seven of King Saul’s sons and grandsons to the Gibeonites so that they could execute them publicly. The Lord told David that Israel’s famine was caused by Saul’s deliberate killing of the Gibeonites years before. Saul had had no right to attack them, because Jonathan had made a vow before God to the Gibeonites to never attack and/or kill them (even though they had tricked the Israelites into the vow).

Out of the blue, I suddenly remembered something I had said to a dear brother in the Middle East in a very emotional moment three years ago. This brother had been receiving death threats because he served the Lord and helped those who wanted to know more about Jesus. He had shared with us how he was ready to be a martyr but found it very upsetting to receive phone calls and photos from his ‘enemies’ about his family’s whereabouts during the day. He also shared with us how he would get up very early in the morning to pray and plead with the Lord, and after that he would walk on the walls of their land, anoint them and blow the ram’s horn to declare war on God’s enemies.

Touched by what they were going through, I said that our family would stand with them in prayer, and as a sign, we would also blow a ram’s horn in the morning. The problem was that I didn’t own a ram’s horn, but I was determined to get one once we were back at home. We really prayed for them intensely, and although their situation got a little bit better, we as a family still continued to pray for them ... but I didn’t get a ram’s horn until about a year ago, and even then, I didn’t fulfil my promise in that regard. So after the Lord reminded me of my vow, I took the ram’s horn and attempted to blow it ... but only wind came out. I know there’s nothing ‘magical’ about blowing the ram’s horn, but I realised that the words I had spoken to our brother were probably also just like wind before God. I prayed and asked Him for forgiveness, and after a couple of tries, the most precious sound came out!

This made me realise just how ‘cheap’ we can be with our words and commitments. Do we really pray for someone when we say we will? Can people count on your word? Remember that Jesus said in Matthew 5 that our ‘yes’ must be ‘yes’ and our ‘no’, ‘no’. As Christians, we need to be honourable and trustworthy – even in the small things we say.

“Let your words be the genuine picture of your heart.” - John Wesley

WEEK 9: Hide and Seek

"Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him." (Psalm 34:8, NIV)

A couple of years ago when we were called to go into missions, God assured us from John 21 that He will *"prepare our breakfast"* – we just need to be obedient. My husband and I didn't know how this would work but realised that we had to walk by faith. Five months later, we were in Asia for a mission conference. We had only been there for three days when my dad passed away, and we really felt the urge to fly back as soon as possible.

Not having the luxury of looking into changing our flights (as the country blocks almost all internet access), we felt trapped. Two days later, we had three travel agents trying to help us get back home, but with no success. It almost felt impossible that with today's advances, you couldn't fly a family back home immediately. On the third day, the group moved to a city with an international airport. With much hope in our hearts, we said goodbye to the others and left for the airport, praying that we could get on a stand-by list, but it turned out that this was not an option in the country where we had to get a connecting flight.

Twice within an hour, my husband went to the airline's ticket desk to see if there were any flights available, but with no success, as all flights were fully booked. While my husband was standing in the queue a third time, one of my friends let me know that they were praying during their lunch break at work, and we should go back to the queue in five minutes' time. My husband came back and started to get our things together so we could get a taxi back into town, saying that the lady at the desk was now annoyed with him, because there really were no seats available on any flights. I showed him my friend's message, but it took a lot of convincing to get him to face the angry ticket lady again.

What happened? The lady didn't want to help us because, according to her, we were wasting her time, but my husband pleaded with her and she looked again at her system ... and there they were ... four seats next to each other on a flight leaving within an hour!

With Psalm 34:8 in mind, our family hugged each other and stood in awe of what had just happened. Then our seven-year-old son suddenly said: *"Hey, you guys, this is Jesus preparing our breakfast!"*

"It is a safe thing to trust Him to fulfil the desire which He creates." - Amy Carmichael

WEEK 10: Trust Fall

“When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward Him, He said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?’ He asked this only to test him, for He already had in mind what He was going to do.” John 6:5-6, NLT)

On a recent trip to the Middle East, we again felt overwhelmed by the need that exists within refugee communities. Firstly, you’re struck by their material needs. At the place where we were, the refugees are not allowed to work, but they are expected to pay monthly rent for the extremely run-down apartments they are put in. Most of the time, you won’t find electricity, water and furniture in these dwellings ... not to mention other basics like food, diapers and clothes. Then, while you’re talking to them, you start to realise their emotional and spiritual needs as well.

One morning, an Irish pastor shared with us the following message from John 6 during a team devotion. He said that when Jesus multiplied the fish and bread for the 5,000, He was looking for faith and willingness from His disciples. He was not caught off guard by the hungry crowd and already knew what the outcome for the day would be, but He was looking for faith and willingness from His disciples, not from the crowd. He was not even looking for big faith, only faith like a mustard seed.

Just like the disciples, our measures of faith and willingness have an effect on others. When we put our faith and trust in God (albeit in small measures like a mustard seed), it will have an impact on the ‘crowd’ around us. That little boy’s lunch of dried fish and barley bread (which was considered a ‘poor man’s meal’) that Andrew handed to Jesus had an enormous impact on the lives of those around him. We need to realise that it’s not about what we have and how much we have, it’s about our willingness to hand it over and have faith in the One whose hands we put it in.

“Faith is the willingness to risk anything on God.” - Jack Hyles