



*Rick Ellis*

I love camp! I have been involved in youth ministry for almost 15 years, working at Friends churches in Southern California. During the summer and winter, I would take my youth group kids to Quaker Meadow Christian Camp. Many summers I would be at camp for weeks at a time. It is an amazing place! Those who have been to Quaker Meadow will tell you how clearly God spoke to them at camp.

Camp rekindled my love for the mountains, the great outdoors, and exploring the wilderness. As a college student, one of the first majors I pursued was forestry. That major changed numerous times, finally ending with a Master of Arts in Christian Education with an emphasis in youth ministry.

This week's devotionals focus on my love of the outdoors and some of my favorite hikes. It is incredible how many times in the Scriptures we see God's people seeking him in the high places. Even Jesus retreated to mountain tops to pray. I hope that you will also catch a glimpse of him through my outdoor journeys.

Today it is very popular to have a playlist of songs on an MP3 player or phone to listen to music while working or exercising. Included are songs that I think would be great to listen to as you read the devotional. I have listed the musical artists to help you in retrieving lyrics from the internet. I hope that you will take the time to discover and enjoy these songs as part of your devotional time.

*BIBLE READING: Romans 15:18-21*

One of my favorite hikes (a phrase I am sure you will read every day in this devotional series) is to a unique waterfall found in southern Utah. Most waterfalls are found where a stream or river approaches a cliff, but Cascade Falls emerges from a cave. Sourced from an underground stream, Cascade Falls bursts out of the side of a mountain falling to a valley floor where it becomes an amazing river—the Virgin River. It is amazing that a relatively small waterfall can be the source of a powerful river strong enough to carve canyons and create gorges out of solid rock.

Another amazing hike is called The Narrows—trekkers walk in the Virgin River as the walls of Zion Canyon rise alongside up to hundreds of feet high and, in some sections, span less than 100 feet across. Zion Canyon was formed over years of erosion by the carving force of the Virgin River. When traveling on Highway 15 between Nevada and Arizona, one is trekking literally in the gorge carved by the Virgin River. Cascade Falls, the Virgin River, and Zion Canyon are beautiful to anyone willing to take the time to explore them.

The Gospels are small books, books that have the capacity to be very powerful. Like a river, both dangerous and beautiful, the Gospels can bring about great change in the lives of those who take the time to explore them. Likewise, these books can overwhelm readers with their beauty.

*SONG: Overwhelmed (Big Daddy Weave)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: When was the last time you explored the Gospels? Pray to be filled with the expectation that you would discover something beautiful and possibly new when you open and read your Bible.*

—Rick Ellis

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 17:1-13*

Another one of my favorite hikes is found at Quaker Meadow Christian Camp. As a camp counselor, I loved to take a small group of students on this tough and strenuous hike early in the morning. Our goal: Get to the top of the granite mountain in time to watch the morning sunrise.

From the top of the mountain, the views are amazing: miles and miles of forest filled with pine trees and sequoias. In the early hours before the dawn, the only sounds heard come from the wildlife rustling through the bushes or trees or those flying overhead. I enjoyed sharing these peaceful surroundings with small groups of students.

This peace is finally broken as the sun begins to appear, rising up through the trees in the distance. Shortly after sunrise, the camp bell rings, waking campers who are still sleeping. Within minutes, the valley below is filled once again with laughter from hundreds of young people. But nothing brought me greater joy than to be surrounded by students removed from the distractions of the world back home, experiencing God's creation.

There is something magical and transformative about being in such a place, at that hour, with my special friends.

*SONG: Higher Ground (Todd Agnew)*

*PRAAYER SUGGESTION: Pray for a spirit of transformation and a new, deeper understanding of peace and joy this week.*

—Rick Ellis

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 5:1-12*

There are many amazing hikes at Quaker Meadow Camp: Eagle's Nest, Garden of Eden, Inspiration Point, and Needles Lookout. Needles Lookout is a fire observation tower built on top of a granite mountain. It was built in the 1930s and, ironically, burned down in 2011.

Reaching the trail requires a 2.5 mile drive down a dirt road, and from the trailhead the hike itself is another 2.5 miles. Before leaving camp to hike this trail, I wanted to be sure I went down the right dirt road and took the right trail. From the map I could see that the trail was relatively easy except for the last half mile, which was a series of switchbacks. It looked simple enough, so we packed a lunch and grabbed some water bottles, figuring this was going to be a four-hour trip and we would get hungry and thirsty.

Maps are funny things, though—they don't tell us the entire story. We got to the dirt road, found the trailhead, then hiked the 2.5 miles, struggling up the switchbacks. But when we got to the enormous staircase leading to Needles Lookout, we found a steel gate closing off the stairs. Needles Lookout is closed to the public on Tuesdays.

I believed the map to be true—and it was. But more than believing the map, we must know the terrain and the area. A map may show a lake, but was it a dry winter causing the lake to dry up? Or is the lookout you are hiking to closed for the day?

Jesus' story is a map to be followed and it will lead you somewhere. But have you experienced the story? Do you know the story? How familiar are you with Jesus' ways?

*SONG: I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For (U2)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Pray that you may know the story and experience it daily.*

—Rick Ellis

*BIBLE READING: 2 Timothy 4:1-8*

After a long day of work, I come home to a very energetic and bouncy puppy who wants a lot of attention and an opportunity to really stretch her legs. Each day I take Zoey, our half Jack Russell terrier, for a two- to three-mile walk through our neighborhood. On my days off, I take Zoey into the hills of Yorba Linda where we go on five-mile hikes.

It is fun to watch her chase after squirrels, rabbits, and lizards. No matter the weather or the time of day, she never seems to run out of energy. Even though she is panting heavily, I sometimes have to force her to drink water.

I used these hikes as preparation for a much bigger hike I had planned—Yosemite. I packed my daypack with a snack and water for me and Zoey, and to help simulate a heavier backpack, I also loaded weights. The pack got heavier with each hike, and each time the going started rough. But as I built up stamina and found myself able to hike five miles with a 20-pound pack, I felt I was ready for Yosemite.

I love the Bible reading for today. I want to be able to share what I know, but I want to share “with great patience and careful instruction.”

*SONG: Mountain of God (Third Day)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Pray for training to be fully prepared to share the Word.*

—Rick Ellis

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 17:14-21*

This past summer I went on my first backpack trip. When I was growing up, my family went on numerous camping trips to our National Forest campgrounds. We slept in tents and brought cookstoves with provisions to make our trips enjoyable and comfortable. In later years we slept in a camper, until we were too old, and then we three boys were thrown back into the tent. But I always wanted to backpack, to rough it, to carry all my camping gear on my back and trudge through the wilderness.

After months of hiking in the foothills, I thought I was ready. We arrived in Yosemite Valley and parked the truck. It is such a beautiful place! Once there, we grabbed the packs, slung them on our backs, and began the half-mile walk to the backpacker camp where we would spend the first night. Ugh! I thought I was going to pass out!

Carrying a 20-pound daypack around the foothills was not enough of a warm up for this. I now found myself carrying a 45-pound pack at an altitude of 4500 feet. I wasn't as prepared as I thought.

Ministry is filled with opportunities to put into practice what we have learned. If I would have trained and trained for this trip but never gone, it would have all been in vain. Jesus works with the disciples, training and training these young men about how to be like him. Unfortunately, there were times when they failed, and times when we fail. But isn't it in our failings that we grow?

*SONG: I Will Follow (Chris Tomlin)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: At the end of each day, notice areas where you have failed. Pray for growth from that failure and any past failure.*

—Rick Ellis

*BIBLE READING: Philippians 2:1-4*

Today started the adventure. I woke up and prepared some instant coffee and a high carbohydrate/high protein breakfast. I had called my wife before I fell asleep and asked that she pray for me and the group—I wasn't sure if I was going to come back alive. She said she would.

We hiked a mile to catch a bus, and thankfully the hike was a lot easier than the day before. We were now headed to the trailhead at Tuolumne Meadows—altitude 8,600 feet. From here we were going to hike back to Yosemite Valley with a side trip up Half Dome, a total hike of 27.5 miles. Our first hike would be almost 7 miles long to Vogelsang—altitude 10,100 feet!

This trip included Brian (a youth pastor friend), some of his former students, and some of my former students. Brian and I had seen these young people grow up to be amazing individuals living their lives for Christ and for their communities. They are filled with expectations to live a kingdom life today and to serve and love their neighbor.

The hike was even harder than I expected. My rented pack constantly shifted, painfully digging into my hip. The weight alone was almost unbearable. Thankfully my former students stepped up, taking turns to carry my pack as I took their lighter packs; sometimes they even carried both packs. I was amazed to watch my friends step up and take care of me during this hike. Without their help, the hike would have been unbearable. Finally, after many rests and breaks, we reached our first destination.

*SONG: Give Me Your Eyes (Brandon Heath)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Pray for the compassion and humility to help someone else succeed.*

—Rick Ellis

*BIBLE READING: 1 Corinthians 15:58*

Vogelsang is beautiful. The air is crisp and two amazing lakes lie right outside camp. That evening's meal was very tasty, and we ended the day with a nice cup of hot cocoa. It was a great time of sitting around together, laughing and sharing about the day's hike, celebrating that we had accomplished something pretty grand.

The next morning Brian informed us that he had banged up his ankle pretty bad and was not going to be able to continue the hike. My guys and I stayed behind while the rest of the group continued on the journey. We decided to make a day of Vogelsang and investigate the area while Brian recuperated.

We explored Fletcher and Booth Lakes, walking around the shores and hiking around camp. We ate lunch, shared some more stories, laughed, and took naps. We left camp that afternoon and headed back the way we came in.

There is something amazing about arriving at a destination, a sense of accomplishment even when the desired outcome didn't happen the way it was planned. Few attempt what we did that summer; more than four million people visit the park every year, but only fifteen thousand visit the wilderness areas. (Ninety-four percent of the park is wilderness.)

The apostle Paul talks of fighting good fights and finishing strong. We are daily confronted with battles and competitions that need to be fought, races and deadlines that need to be completed. Finishing strong doesn't always mean winning.

*SONG: Lay Down My Pride (Jeremy Camp)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Pray for the ability to finish each day strong, focusing on how well you—and Jesus—completed the day.*

—Rick Ellis