

- DEACON DEVOTIONS 2021 -



DETOURS

Overcoming Spiritual
Roadblocks in
Ministry

in partnership with

Rev. Martin Boardman
*Dunamis Fellowship
Canada*



DIACONAL MINISTRIES
CANADA



INTRODUCTION

Over the years, Diaconal Ministries Canada has witnessed a diaconate/congregation start down a new ministry path when “out of nowhere”, a blockade (or a couple of blockades) crops up that is discouraging and often results in a slowing or halting of progress. Unfortunately, we could list a number of true stories as examples.

These blockades can be mental and/or physical illness in the family of key leaders, or someone moving away or moving on, a spirit of discouragement among the team and/or congregation, an unresolved issue coming to the surface (again), or fill-in-the-blank. These blockades can easily be brushed off as one-offs and we can simply say, "that's life!", taken as a whole, we as staff began to wonder if there was more going on.

We felt as though a pattern had emerged which needed to be acknowledged and taken seriously.

So, we've put together this new set of devotions called: **Detours; Overcoming Spiritual Roadblocks in Ministry.**

The focus of these devotions is how the Holy Spirit equips and empowers deacons (and all believers) to do the work of ministry and advance the Kingdom of God. We see these as a 'spiritual toolbox' of resources for deacons to use: prayer, discernment, listening to God's voice, getting guidance from the Lord, and more.

Our hope is that you will be encouraged by this new set of devotions, remembering to put on the full armour of God (Eph. 6:10-20) as you actively serve in God's Kingdom, despite the challenges and detours that can come your way.



“For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens.”

[Ephesians 6:12]



DETOURS


OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL
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Devotion #1 - Stephen, Full of the Holy Spirit Acts 6:1-8

January 2021

Introduction

Acts 6 describes the establishment of the role of deacon within the community of believers. A dispute over meeting the needs of the Greek and Hebrew widows led to the leadership making the decision to find people who could meet the needs within the community.

The leaders looked for people who were described as being full of the Holy Spirit. They found Stephen who is described as being "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5) 


Filled with the Holy Spirit

The fact that the apostles specifically looked for people who were full of the Holy Spirit suggests that some of the congregation were not! So were some only half full? Were others empty? Just exactly what did the apostles mean when they looked for people full of the Holy Spirit?

When we look at the original language, the English word "full" is translated with several

Greek words. These Greek words all have slightly different nuanced meanings.

In Acts 6, the word used for full describes a state of being full rather than the act of being filled.

The Apostles were looking for people who demonstrated by their lives and character that the Holy Spirit was at work within them. The Holy Spirit was doing the work of sanctification within them, conforming them to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29). 



Rest Stop

The twelve decided that they needed to find seven people who would meet the practical needs of the community. These seven needed to be 'qualified' to serve in this position.

- What qualities would you have looked for in these seven?
- Now compare your list to what the apostles came up with in Acts 6:3. What are the similarities? The differences?



Rest Stop

Take a moment as a group to discuss together what it means to be full of the Holy Spirit. Give an example of where you've seen this 'quality' in another person.


How do we make sure that we are full of the Holy Spirit?

There are people in our lives who we know well, and there are some who we would describe as just being an acquaintance. When the apostles were looking to appoint deacons, they did not want people who were just acquainted with the Holy Spirit. They wanted people who knew him well!

It is important to remember that the Holy Spirit is a person. He is the third person of the trinity. As such,

he is not a force or power. R.A. Torrey, American evangelist, pastor, and educator, said:

"If you think of the Holy Spirit as a mere influence or power, then our thought will constantly be, 'How can I get hold of the Holy Spirit and use it?' But, if you think of Him in the biblical way, as a person of divine majesty and glory, your thought will be 'how can the Holy Spirit get hold of me and use me?'"

So the question is not how full of the Holy Spirit am I, but how much of my life is surrendered to the Holy Spirit? The apostles were looking for people within the congregation who were surrendered to God. They wanted people growing in relationship with the Father and the Son through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. 

So how do we get to know the Holy Spirit?

God's Word tells us about the Holy Spirit. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, the Spirit is shown to be actively at work within our world. As we read Scripture, we get to know a lot about the Holy Spirit. While that is important and necessary, it does not bring us into a relationship.

Just as in a human relationship, a relationship with the Holy Spirit develops through spending time together. We need to spend time with Holy Spirit, and we do that through prayer. Prayer is a supernatural gift from God that brings us into a close relationship with



Rest Stop

When we look at our personal lives, how much are we allowing the Holy Spirit to change us, sanctify us, and make us more like Jesus? What kind of relationship do we have with the Holy Spirit? How is that evident in our diaconate?

God the Father through the Holy Spirit. As we enter into prayer, ask the Holy Spirit to reveal who he is, who the Father is, and who Jesus is. Then the Spirit will do just that!

We need to give the Spirit some space to speak to us. This might mean we need to pause and spend time listening to Him rather than just telling God what we want.



The Scenic Route (optional)

Below is a prayer exercise that may help to create a space where you can grow deeper in your relationship with the Holy Spirit. Encourage your fellow deacons to do this as well and help keep each other accountable. If you agree, share your experiences. This can also be done individually for those wishing to go deeper.

- Take 15 minutes out of your day. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. For some, that could be in a comfortable chair in your living room. For others, it might take place as part of a walk outside in a local park. (Fifteen minutes may seem like a long time, but in reality, it is just 1% of your day!)
- For the first 5 minutes, focus upon praising God for who he is and what he has done. You could make a list of his attributes as a way to stay focused.
- For the next 5 minutes, move into a time of prayer. Ask the Lord for the things you need (petition) and others' needs (intercession).
- Then in the final 5 minutes, ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you about your relationship with God, and then listen to what He has to say. He may give you the impression of Scripture to look up or a picture for you to think about. If a distracting thought comes, simply choose to ignore it and return to asking the Spirit to speak. It may be helpful to write down in a journal what you hear the Holy Spirit say.

Note:

This might not be easy at first, and some days will be more challenging than others. But as you persevere and allow the Holy Spirit to speak, you will begin to grow in your relationship. The Spirit will bring words of encouragement as well as point out areas where change needs to happen. He will highlight areas of God's Word to be attentive to. And the Spirit will begin a change within. You will find that you are as Stephen was, full of the Holy Spirit, and will be able to bring wisdom, faith, and grace into the ministry situations in which the Lord places you as a deacon.



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Devotion #2 - Prayer Changes Things Acts 4:23-31

February 2021

When we step into the place of prayer, it is often to ask the Lord to change circumstances. We pray for healing for someone who is sick, comfort for someone who is grieving and for the Lord to change the heart of someone who is walking away from God's kingdom. Prayer changes things, and the Lord is able to move in people's lives and circumstances because we pray.

The leaders looked for people who were described as being full of the Holy Spirit. They found Stephen who is described as being "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5)

But prayer does not just change a situation. It will also change who we are so that the Lord can use us to be his change agents in this world. God's word is a double-edged sword, and it works on us just as much as on the situation we are praying for.

It can merely be the Holy Spirit's action, giving us a more profound love for the person we are praying for. But it can be a more profound effect. In Acts 4, Peter and John had been in prison because they had been speaking about Jesus. The religious leaders threatened them and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

Once the leaders released Peter and John, these apostles gathered with the believers to report on what had happened and then they moved into a time of prayer. They prayed about the persecution and discrimination they faced. You would think that the focus of their prayers would be to stop the persecution and to protect themselves from future imprisonment. But instead, they prayed that they, not the religious leaders, would be changed.

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. (Acts 4:29)

The believers pray for great boldness to be able to speak. They ask the Lord to perform signs and wonders and for them to have opportunities to talk about Jesus.






Rest Stop

- What is the role of prayer in your diaconate?
- How have you seen God move in big ways; in your life, your diaconate, and/or your church?

The religious leaders were intentionally seeking to limit the believers' ability to talk about Jesus. They were effectively blocking the advancement of God's kingdom. They were seeking to stop the gospel message of freedom through Jesus Christ. But instead of praying for the blockages to be removed and for things to be easy, the believers prayed for the boldness to speak and witness about Jesus, even amid difficulties and persecution.

Their prayers were not "Change this bad situation, Lord," but "Change us, so that we can be effective in this situation!" How many times do we pray, asking the Lord to make things easy for us, instead of praying for the strength, wisdom and empowerment to go through challenging or difficult circumstances?

God heard and answered their prayer in such a tangible way that the building was shaken. The believers were filled with the Spirit and spoke boldly. They still faced persecution and jail time (Acts 5:18), but the Holy Spirit empowered them to deal with those situations. The Lord changed the situation by empowering the believers to speak boldly about Jesus, and the result was that the gospel message spread and many of the Jews put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Messiah. 

Prayer changes things, and often the first thing that needs to be changed is our hearts.



Rest Stop

- What challenging circumstances do you face today?
- Are there places you want the Lord to step into and change?
- Spend some time in prayer, asking the Lord about how he may want to change you to become the change agent for the situation.

*"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."
(2 Corinthians 5:17)*

[over]



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Feb. 2021

Devotion #2 - Prayer Changes Things [pg. 3]



The Scenic Route

(optional)

"It is not so important what happens to us; it is more important what happens **in** us."

Pick a day this week and read through Psalm 51, a psalm of David. This Psalm was written after Nathan, the prophet, came to David revealing his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband (see II Samuel 12:1-13).

After reading, reflect on the following questions.

- What was David's prayer? What was he asking of God?
- What did he recognize was needed in himself for God to work?
- What does he request of God in vs. 13-17? What outcome does he hope for?

David did not ask for a change in his circumstances but cried out "Lord, change me!" He prayed for a clean heart and a right spirit. David asked God to change him and clean him up so that he could be a blessing to others.

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Devotion #3 - Why Pray?

John 15:4-8

March 2021

What exactly is prayer, and how does it fit into the work which the Lord calls us to do?

At its heart, prayer is a form of communication. It is a conversation with our Heavenly Father. But dialogue is only the start. Just as in earthly relationships, communication is essential for growth and health. It is the same with our relationship with God. As the apostle John reminds us, we need to abide or remain in Christ. As we remain, we grow in relationship with him.

Prayer is the communication key that unlocks and enlarges that relationship. If we want to abide in Christ and grow that relationship with him, we need to pray. 🌲🌲🌲

But prayer is much more. Prayer is our entryway into a working dynamic and partnership with God. God calls us to be co-labourers with Him in building the kingdom of God. He uses our prayers to bring transformation and change. God, in His sovereignty, has chosen to work through the prayers of his people, or as John Wesley put it, "God does nothing except by prayer."

Growing up, I spent a lot of time staying with my grandmother. I loved visiting Granny's house on a Friday because that was baking day, and I got to help. Looking back, I'm not sure I was much help. Granny would measure all of the ingredients out. I would get to pour the ingredients into the bowl. It took a lot longer to get things done when I was helping. But it did build a relationship between my grandmother and me, and we eventually got a cake or cookies to enjoy.

It is the same way with prayer. On his own, God could do things faster and more efficiently. Instead, he chooses to work with and through us. As we cooperate in prayer, we see the Lord bring transformation to our situations, and we get to grow in our



Rest Stop

- How important is communication in your relationship with your spouse, or with your best friend?
- What happens to that relationship when you forget to communicate?

relationship with the Lord. As we come to the Lord in prayer, he inspires us through the Holy Spirit. The Lord will give us discernment and direction for what we need both to pray and to do. As we respond and pray into that guidance, God moves to answer our prayers, and transformation happens. In effect, we pray his Kingdom purposes into reality. 🌲🌲🌲

John Calvin also reinforces the idea that prayer is the power tool for kingdom building. He said that we are not to expect anything from God unless we have asked in prayer. In his Institutes, as he talks about prayer, he says, "we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon." (1)

Prayer is the primary power tool through which God reveals his will in a particular situation, and then through prayer, we can dig up the treasures and see His Kingdom advance. So everything we do needs to include the work of prayer.



Rest Stop

- How have you experienced prayer as a working dynamic between you and God?
- How have you seen prayer direct or influence the work which you do as deacons?

R.A. Torrey, the American evangelist and pastor, wrote that "Prayer is the key that unlocks all the storehouses of God's infinite grace and power. All that God is, and all that God has, is at the disposal of prayer. But we must use the key. Prayer can do anything that God can do, and as God can do anything, prayer is omnipotent." (2)

Prayer is the doing before we do. To be effective in any aspect of ministry, we need to be drawing close to God, receiving His direction and guidance. Once we have our directions, we can begin to pray and step out in obedience to that prayer.

Bathing the work of ministry in prayer keeps it on track with the Lord. He will guide and keep us on course. As we do, we will find the treasures promised in his word become real, and God's kingdom is advanced.

"Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always."
[1 Chronicles 16:11]

[over]



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Mar. 2021

Devotion #3 - Why Pray? [pg. 3 of 3]



The Scenic Route

(optional)

Think about an issue that you are currently facing. It could be something personal or a situation you are facing as a deacon.

Ask the Lord to give you a Bible verse which relates to your situation. (The Holy Spirit may just bring a Scripture verse to mind as you sit quietly and listen to him, or the Holy Spirit may guide you as you use a concordance or Bible app to look for appropriate Scriptures.)

Spend some time each day praying through the Bible verse(s) you have found, inviting the Lord to unlock his storehouses of power and grace in the situation.

***If you choose to do this as a group exercise** you could work together to come up with a list of Bible verses to pray into. Then debrief together at a later time about how you have seen the Lord work through your prayers.

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- (1) John Calvin, (trans by F.L. Battles), *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1975), III, 20, 2.
(2) R.A. Torrey, *The Power of Prayer and the Prayer of Power* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987) p. 17

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Devotion #4 - Letting God Speak

Read: John 10:14-18

April 2021

Shortly after we moved to our new house, I was driving home one night in the fog. I was going on what were then unfamiliar country roads in the dark. As such, I was not always aware of exactly where I was. Fortunately, I had put my new address into the map app on my phone so I could listen and follow the directions as to where I needed to turn and in which direction I needed to travel.

When we listen to the directions on a phone app, we have to listen and follow the directions we receive, and they guide us to where we need to go. Similarly, as we listen to the Lord in prayer, He guides and directs us in the best route.

But how do we hear God's voice when we pray?

Jesus promises that if we belong to Him, then we will hear and know His voice.

"When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice." (John 10:4, NIV)

At the time of Jesus, shepherds would be with their sheep so much that the sheep would get to know their shepherd well and would be able to recognize his voice. When the shepherd called the sheep, they would respond. The sheep would ignore anyone else who would call them. Similarly, as we spend time in prayer, we will become familiar with the voice of Jesus and recognize when He is speaking to us. We learn to recognize His voice and respond to Him.

The scriptures show us many different ways in which the Lord speaks to His people:

Scripture

God speaks through Scripture. *"God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light on our path"* (Psalm 119:105). As we wait on the Lord and listen, He may bring a passage of Scripture to mind, giving us guidance about how to pray.

[over]

Images

It has been said, "a picture is worth a thousand words." The Lord may give us a picture to pray into. This is one of the ways that the Lord speaks to the prophet Jeremiah:

The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?"

"I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied. (Jeremiah 1:11, NIV)

Thoughts

The Lord may speak to our minds in a thought which suddenly pops into our head. Philip, in Acts 8, had the idea to go and stay close to a particular chariot. When he did, he found an Ethiopian reading from the Scriptures and led him to Christ. The Lord places thoughts into our minds to guide us. It can be a single word or a phrase or stance which will speak into our present situation.


Visions and Dreams

The Lord may give us a glimpse of reality as He sees it through a vision, just as He did with Peter in Acts 10, or the Holy Spirit may provide us with a dream as He did with Joseph and Daniel.

An Audible Voice

As a boy, Samuel heard the Lord speak directly to him, but at that time he did not recognize the Lord's voice. As he grew in his relationship with the Lord, he was able to identify what the Lord was saying.

Nature, Music and the Arts

God's glory is proclaimed by the creation that is all around us. The Lord will speak through the wonder of the creation and the creative mediums of art and music. The Lord may bring a song to mind. This is especially true for songs that use Scripture. 



Rest Stop

- How have you experienced the Lord speaking to you in prayer?
- Is there a particular way that you hear His voice?

However the Lord speaks, we need to make sure that we discern what we hear to make sure it is not just our thoughts or the thoughts of the enemy. These four discernment questions can help evaluate what we are hearing:

1. Does it give glory to Jesus Christ in the present and the future? (John 16:13-14)
2. Is it consistent with the intentions and character of God as revealed in Scripture? (2Timothy 3:16-17)
3. Do other Holy Spirit-filled believers have a confirming witness? (1 Cor. 14:29)

[over]

4. Is there confirmation in objectively verifiable events or facts? (Deut. 18:21-22)

If we can say "Yes" to all of these questions, we can be confident that we are hearing from the Lord. Sometimes we have to wait and even walk out in faith for a while before seeing the answer to the last question. 🌲🌲🌲

This may require some time and practice – learning to quiet down our minds so that we can hear from the Lord – but as we do, we will hear His voice and He will provide us with direction and guidance.



Rest Stop

- Share an experience of how the Holy Spirit has guided you.
- How did you know it was the Holy Spirit?
- What happened when you followed the guidance?



The Scenic Route (optional)

Take five minutes at the beginning of your prayer time to listen to what the Holy Spirit wants to say about how to pray for a particular situation. Open that time of listening with a prayer asking the Lord to speak to you.

Wait in the quiet, listening for the Lord. He may speak in a picture, a word, a Scripture or one of the other ways mentioned in the devotional. Make a note of what you hear or see.

If you are in a group, you can share what you heard and listen to other people to find common threads. Or, if you are on your own, you can just record what you hear in a journal.

Then use the four discernment questions to evaluate what you have heard.

If you can say yes to them, then move into praying according to how the Holy Spirit has led you.

Reflect upon how your prayer time changed when you made space to listen to the Lord.



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Devotion #5 - Praying with Authority

Read: John 16:23-24

May 2021

When we see the flashing lights of a police car behind us, we pull over to the side of the road and await the officer approaching the vehicle to ask for our licence and registration. We comply because we know that the officer has the authority to do that. They can only stop us because of the authority of the badge which they carry.

In a similar manner, we carry a badge of authority in prayer because we belong to Jesus. We have his badge, his authority. As we accept Jesus as Lord, we are adopted by the Father through the justifying work of the Spirit, who allows us to cry out, "Abba Father" (Rom 8:15 & Gal 4:6). As adopted children of God, we can come to him at any time. I came across a quote from Tim Keller which expressed this beautifully:

"The only person who dares wake up a king at 3:00 am for a glass of water is a child. We have that kind of access." 



Rest Stop


Think about the quote from Tim Keller. Have you ever thought about your relationship with God in that way? Does thinking of yourself as a child of the king change how you might approach prayer?



Rest Stop

Read Ephesians 2:6. Where does the apostle Paul say that we are seated? What does that mean for us when we come to pray?

With such access, we can come before the Lord at any time. We can approach God's throne with confidence because we have the authority of his children (Heb 4:16). We have the authority of access, and we have the authority of request.

When we come to the Father in the name of Jesus, we are promised by Christ that "my father will give you whatever you ask in my name" (John 16:23). Our requests are heard through Jesus and the Father will respond to those prayers. 



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May 2021

Devotion #5 -Praying With Authority [pg. 2 of 2]

Christ's work of redemption allows the reconciliation of humanity with God. The relationship which Adam had with the Father is being redeemed and so too is the task God gave to Adam. Adam had dominion in Eden. He had authority and was a co-labourer with God. God invites us today into that place of domination and authority as through the Holy Spirit we are invited to join in the work the Father is doing just as Jesus did (John 5:19). One of the ways we can participate in that work is by praying. 🌲



Rest Stop

Think about a time when you experienced the power of praying in the name of Jesus. How did that differ from adding a perfunctory "in Jesus' name" to the end of a more typical prayer?

When we pray in the authority of our position in Christ and pray into God's will in the name and authority of Jesus, then our prayers become powerful and effective. It's time to pray in authority.



The Scenic Route

(optional)

In a prayer time, ask God to bring to mind attitudes or experiences that may hinder your prayer as it relates to how you ask God. Respond with confession or forgiveness as it seems appropriate or needed.

Listen for God's gentle voice of correction and/or encouragement as you grow in the adventure of asking God in prayer. Record how you sense God is calling you to proceed. Be sure to apply discernment to what you sense God is saying to you.

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Devotion #6 - Resistance

Read: Acts 17:1-9

June 2021

Often when we start a new ministry project, we find that we run into resistance. Sometimes, resistance happens as minor irritations, like communication challenges with people missing emails or text messages. Misunderstandings can occur within the organizing team. Sometimes it seems that there is challenge after challenge which has to be overcome, and while they may not be huge, they can slow down the progress of the ministry project and sometimes even shut the project down completely.

It is easy to dismiss such challenges as being just a part of life. We can say: "This is just the way things are." But it could also be that this resistance is an indication of spiritual warfare. A Biblical worldview shows that we are in the midst of a spiritual war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. 🌲🌲🌲

We see a pattern within the gospels and the book of Acts. Whenever Jesus appears in a situation or the Holy Spirit moves, there is a response from the kingdom of darkness. There is some manifestation of evil.

In Mark chapter 1 we see Jesus teaching at the Synagogue in Capernaum. The people were astonished at his teaching because he taught with authority. Jesus was manifesting the kingdom of God in that place. We see the reaction in verse 23:

"Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!'" (Mark 1:23-24)




Rest Stop

- Have you experienced a time when it felt like there was resistance to a project that you were working on? How did you experience that resistance?
- Did you consider that the challenges were the result of spiritual warfare?

[over]

The presence of Jesus and the kingdom of God caused the manifestation of the kingdom of darkness. This manifestation happened through the demonized man.

We see a similar situation in the book of Acts. When Paul first arrived in Thessalonica (Acts 17), he headed into the synagogue on the Sabbath. For three weeks Paul preaches about Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. As a result, some of the Jews and the Gentiles were saved and became followers of Jesus. It looked like things were going very well, but then there was resistance.

Those jealous of Paul gathered a group together and started a riot! That seems to be quite a strong reaction to Paul, who was simply preaching and teaching in the synagogue. But the chaos that erupted resulted in Paul being sent on his way to Berea, where the same thing happens again. 



Rest Stop

The principle of the enemy getting stirred up by the presence of Jesus, or resistance taking place when the Holy Spirit has been working, is seen in both the gospels and the book of Acts. Take some time to read the following accounts and notice how this pattern takes place.

- Luke 9:37-43
- Acts 19:23-41

On the surface, it looks like jealousy and pride leading to some unhealthy responses and ultimately conflict. Still, we need to dig a little deeper to look at what is happening physically and spiritually.

Through the ministry of Jesus and then Paul and the other apostles, the kingdom of God was both preached and demonstrated. As Paul would remind the Ephesians, we are in the midst of a spiritual battle where we see what is happening in the physical is impacted by what is happening in the spiritual.

As we engage in projects today that seek to advance the kingdom of God, which demonstrates the love and mercy of Jesus, or aims to promote Biblical justice and reconciliation within our world, there will be resistance that gets stirred up within the kingdom of darkness. That may manifest itself in the challenges and struggles that we face.

Recognizing the spiritual challenges and the resistance is the first step in dealing with it. The apostle Paul reminds us that we do have spiritual weapons to deal with these issues (2

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Corinthians 10:4). The primary weapon we have is prayer. In Ephesians 6, Paul describes “spiritual armour” with which we can stand against the devil's schemes. As we pray, led by the Holy Spirit, we can combat and deal with the resistance the enemy may bring. Through prayer and intercession, we can overcome the obstacles and we can see God's kingdom advanced.



The Scenic Route (optional)

This prayer exercise is great to do as a group, especially if you suspect that you are dealing with spiritual warfare.

If we suspect that spiritual warfare is involved in a situation, it is essential to discern what is going on and ask the Lord to give direction about dealing with the issue.

1. Take time to first pray on the armour of God (Ephesians 6:13-18), pausing to reflect upon each piece. As you pray, recognize that you are essentially clothing yourself with Christ (Romans 13:14).
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you if what you are experiencing is spiritual warfare. Spend some time in quiet listening. Journal or share together any images, Scriptures or words which you receive during this time.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to pray for the situation. Again, spend some time listening for the Holy Spirit's strategy. Journal or share what you receive.
4. Pray as the Holy Spirit leads you.

As you do that work of listening to the Holy Spirit, it is important that you also discern it. You can use these four questions as a guide to help you in that process:

1. Does it give glory to Jesus Christ?
2. Is it consistent with God's Word?
3. Do others affirm what you hear from the Spirit?
4. Is there fruit as a result of following the guidance received? (Note: this may only come after you have prayed.)



DETOURS

OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL
ROADBLOCKS IN
MINISTRY

Devotion #7 - Dancing with the Holy Spirit

Read: Acts 8:26-40

July 2021

Have you ever watched a couple while they are ballroom dancing? Those who can do it well simply glide around the room in complete unity. It is incredible to watch how smoothly they move together. Ballroom dancing works because the couple functions as a team. They work together. One person leads, and the other person follows. Both partners know the basic steps of the dance, and so they can cooperate together. As they know the steps and trust each other, the leader can direct their partner around the dance floor with ease.

Ballroom dancing is an excellent picture of how we cooperate with the Holy Spirit to do ministry. The Holy Spirit leads and guides us, and as we cooperate with him, he moves us effectively in ministry. He shows us step-by-step how to fulfill God's plans and purposes in a given situation. In his sovereignty, God has chosen to partner with us in building his kingdom. 🌲🌲🌲

We witness this dance of cooperation in the life of Philip. He was one of the seven deacons who were set apart for ministry in Acts 6. In Acts 8, however, we have the opportunity to watch Philip dance together with the Holy Spirit as he engages in ministry with the Ethiopian eunuch.

As we look at this story, we can see how the Lord leads Philip step-by-step through the encounter to see the Ethiopian saved and God's kingdom advanced.

In the first step, Philip received the instruction to go.

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." Acts 8:26



Rest Stop

How have you experienced the Holy Spirit leading you in a ministry situation? Can you think of a specific time when you experienced a divine appointment with someone? Share or journal your experience.

[over]

The angel does not give Philip the complete plan of what was going to happen. Instead, there is an invitation to trust the angel's word and step out in faith to obey what was said. We do not always have a clear idea about what the Lord may be calling us to do. The guidance which the Holy Spirit gives may just be the first step. Only as we step out will the Spirit give us the directions we need for the next phase of the dance. 🌲🌲🌲

As Philip was obedient with the first step, the Holy Spirit revealed the next step to him.

The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Acts 8:29

Again, the full details are not shared. The chariot is identified as the next step in the

dance of cooperation. As Philip responds in obedience, he receives confirmation as he hears the Ethiopian reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip can take the next step and asks the question, "Do you understand what you are reading?"



Rest Stop

Can you identify an experience where you saw this step-by-step leading of the Holy Spirit? It could be personal or could be as part of a ministry venture. What were the steps of obedience the Lord asked you to take? How did the Lord reveal these steps to you?



Rest Stop

The Lord used the gifts Philip had as an evangelist, placing him in a situation where those gifts could be used. As we look at other stories in the gospels and Acts, we see how the Lord used the gifts people had to do his work (for example, five loaves and two fish). What are the gifts that the Lord has given you individually, or as a diaconate, that he wants you to use to build His kingdom?

The Holy Spirit has already been at work within the heart of the Ethiopian. The Spirit has stirred up a spiritual thirst and hunger within him so that once the question is asked, the Ethiopian opens up and invites Philip to join him and explain more about the passage.

In this next step of the engagement, we see Philip stepping into the kairos moment (kairos means the *right, critical, or opportune moment*), which the Holy Spirit has orchestrated. This kairos moment is a time when the Holy Spirit is moving. He moves within the heart of the eunuch and, at the same time, guides Philip in presenting the gospel to this man. Faith is birthed within the eunuch during the exchange, and he makes a profession of faith and asks to receive water baptism. 🌲🌲🌲

[over]

Devotion #7 - Dancing with the Holy Spirit [pg. 3 of 3]

Philip was used in this dynamic of cooperating with the Holy Spirit. No doubt he had witnessed the Spirit setting up divine appointments for him before, and so he was ready and willing to respond in obedience to the Spirit's promptings.

This dance of cooperation with the Holy Spirit is not a technique for doing ministry. Instead, it is an outflow of our relationship with God. As we grow in our relationship with the Holy Spirit, we too will be able to recognize these moments when the Holy Spirit is inviting us to step on to the dance floor and dance with him.



The Scenic Route

(optional)

Our relationship with God creates the context for this dance of cooperation with the Holy Spirit. God works in the context of love relationships.

Take some time to be quiet before the Lord and invite Him to speak to you about your relationship with him.

- What are the things that he enjoys about you?
- What are the things he is inviting you into to grow your relationship with him?

Journal or share your reflections.

If you are in a group, take time to pray for each other about the areas the Lord has revealed. Give space in the prayer time to listen quietly to the Holy Spirit for each other and pray in obedience to what the Lord reveals. Make sure you allow time for everyone in the group to receive prayer.

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DETOURS

OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL
ROADBLOCKS IN
MINISTRY

Devotion #8 - The Dynamic Duo in Ministry

Read: Exodus 17:8-15

September 2021

There is a vital relationship between prayer and action, which is essential for any kind of ministry that advances the Kingdom of God. Prayer needs to be a foundational component of the work that is done, and it needs to be ongoing to sustain the ministry work.

John Calvin wrote about the necessity of prayer in his institutes:

"Therefore we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that we pointed out by the Lord's gospel and which our faith has gazed upon."(1)

Prayer is needed to see those things the Lord has said he would do. As a result, every aspect of ministry needs to be connected to the work of prayer.

The story of the battle at Rephidim (Exodus 17) is a beautiful illustration of how prayer and action work together to advance God's kingdom. Moses does the work of prayer and Joshua is the one who engages in action on the ground. 🌲🌲🌲

Moses and his prayer team engage in the work of prayer and intercession. Joshua, with his army, engages in the physical fight down on the battlefield. As Moses prayed and raised his staff, Joshua and his men were successful in battle. But if Moses became tired and lowered his hands, Joshua and his men would be pushed back.



Rest Stop

When you look at the passage in Exodus 17, do you see yourself more as a Moses (Intercessor) or as a Joshua (worker)?

"As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning." [Exodus 17:11]


[over]

(1) John Calvin, (Trans by F.L. Battles), Institutes of the Christian Religion (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1975) III, 20, 2

While Joshua dealt with the human problem of the Amalekite army, Moses was dealing with the spiritual issues. As the Apostle Paul would remind the Ephesians:

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." [Ephesians 6:12]

Moses as an intercessor was praying for God's will to be done. In this case, this was the preservation of the Jewish people. But he was also praying against the enemy's strongholds, which the enemy was using to try to destroy the Jewish people.

The battle was ultimately won because both did what they were called to do by the Lord. Joshua fought and Moses prayed. Both the physical and spiritual aspects needed to be dealt with for the battle to be won. 



Rest Stop

Can you identify an experience where you saw this step-by-step leading of the Holy Spirit? It could be personal or could be as part of a ministry venture.

- What were the steps of obedience the Lord asked you to take?
- How did the Lord reveal these steps to you?

This dynamic of prayer and action is necessary for the work of ministry today. There is a need for people like Joshua, who are involved with the ministry on the ground. But they have to be backed up by people like Moses, who can do the work of intercession.

Anytime we seek to advance the kingdom of God, we can expect there to be pushback or resistance from the enemy. We may face unexpected challenges or miscommunications leading to confusion and projects slowing or grinding to a halt. Sometimes it can feel like you are trying to move forward while walking through quicksand or are facing hurricane-strength winds seeking to push you back. At times, it is easy to think that a project may just be too much trouble to continue with. Discouragement robs us of the joy of ministry.

That is why 'Moses intercessors' are vital to the work that deacons (and anyone in ministry) do. Moses intercessors have one foot on earth, watching what is happening physically, but they have one foot in heaven (seated with Christ in the heavenly places) listening to the Lord. The Lord will give them a strategy for prayer and direct them to intercede for God's will to be done and the enemy's plans frustrated.

[over]



Rest Stop

Where is the Lord calling you to be a 'Moses worker', someone who does the work of prayer and intercession for those who are active in ministry?

The intercessor provides covering and protection for those involved in ministry. They ask for God's mercy and his blessing upon the ministry and those involved in it. 🌲🌲🌲

Many times our focus is on finding volunteers who can do the ministry ventures that are happening. But we also need to recruit intercessors who can cover the work in prayer.

Finding one or two people who can pray, then resourcing them with accurate information to be effective in the work of prayer can take time. But

the effort will be rewarded when just like Moses, their hands are lifted in prayer, and God blesses the work of Joshua, and His Kingdom is advanced.



The Scenic Route

(optional, as a group or individually)

Think about a ministry project that you are involved in or are planning. Who are the Moses workers who are supporting the ministry through prayer?

Take a couple of minutes in silence. Ask the Lord to bring to your mind names of people you could approach to ask them to pray for the ministry. Write down the names.

Spend some time praying for the names you have listed. Ask the Lord to prepare their hearts for the work of intercession for this project. Pray and ask the Lord to speak to them already about how they can be praying.

Spend some additional time listening to the Lord, asking him to give you some ideas about the best ways to communicate the prayer needs for the specific ministry.

Finally, plan to connect with the people that have been named. Ask them if they would pray about being involved as an intercessor for the ministry.



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OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL
ROADBLOCKS IN
MINISTRY

Devotion #9 - Mindsets, Worldviews & Strongholds

October 2021

Read: Acts 14:8-20

Close your eyes and imagine a piece of pizza with all of the best toppings on it.

So, did you see pineapple on your pizza? For some people, pineapple goes on pizza, and for others it does NOT belong there. People have different mindsets when it comes to pineapple and pizza.

Together, a series of mindsets form a worldview, which influences how we see and react to our surroundings. Most of the time, we are not conscious of the mindsets that make up our worldview. Just as we don't go through life constantly aware of whether we believe it's appropriate to have pineapple on pizza - until confronted with the issue.

Our worldview is the operating system of our lives, and for the most part, it is something in our subconscious that is reasonably neutral. But it can be influenced by both good and evil. Satan seeks to influence people's worldviews to hinder their relationship with God. Frequently he does this through strongholds.

A stronghold is a tool the enemy uses to block or slow down the advancement of God's kingdom. The stronghold works in such a way as to draw individuals into a particular worldview and entrap them. Once they are pulled into the stronghold, it begins to influence how they think and react.

Evil strongholds are based upon lies or deceptions often centered about who God is or the nature of our salvation. They colour our worldview in specific ways that hinder the advancement of God's kingdom. Strongholds are often a source of resistance we encounter in ourselves or others when we seek to begin a new project or do any work which advances God's kingdom. They are almost always hidden, so we do not see them straight away.

In the passage from Acts, we see how the mindset or worldview of the Lycaonians influenced how they responded to Paul and Barnabas. Their worldview shaped by their understanding of the Greek gods led them to false conclusions about the identity of Paul

[over]

and Barnabas. Paul could see how the stronghold around the Lycaonians was hindering them from encountering God and, specifically, Jesus. This religious Greek god stronghold blocked them from hearing the gospel at first. 🌲🌲🌲

Some years ago, I encountered a stronghold in a church meeting. In a discussion centered around outreach, the comment was made, "Evangelism does not work here!" The statement reveals a foundational deception, which had grown into a worldview that influenced the church's culture. As a result, no outreach efforts had been attempted for

several years. While the church faithfully ministered to its members, it showed no signs of growth. The underlying worldview that "evangelism does not work" had been planted at some point by the enemy. It had slowly grown as more people heard and came to accept and believe the lie. As less outreach was done, the concept of "evangelism does not work" grew and became part of church culture, eventually limiting and blocking the congregation's growth. 🌲🌲🌲



Rest Stop

In Acts 28:1-6, we see another example of how a mindset, or worldview, influences how people react to the Apostle Paul. How did the Maltese mindset affect their attitude towards who Paul was?



Rest Stop

Have you encountered resistance to a ministry opportunity that could be a stronghold?

Many times, we are unable to see a stronghold when we experience it; it is often apparent only in hindsight.

However, the good news is that the Lord has provided spiritual weapons that can deal with strongholds. Through prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit, strongholds can be identified.

We can pray: "Lord, show us the strongholds that are at work in this situation." Then we wait, watching for a revelatory event to take place. The statement "evangelism does not work" was a revelatory statement that revealed an aspect of a stronghold hindering the church.

This gives us a place to begin in prayer and start the work of dismantling the stronghold, a task that requires both the work of prayer as well as a specific action. 🌲🌲🌲

[over]



Rest Stop

Sometimes we are the ones who are stuck in a stronghold. Take a few moments to ask the Lord to reveal if there are strongholds or unhealthy mindsets in your life. Permit God to search your heart. Move into confession and repentance to remove and deal with any mindsets the Lord shows you.

Strongholds can entrap individuals, a specific ministry, a church, a community, or even a whole nation. Asking the Holy Spirit to reveal a stronghold may give valuable insight into why a particular ministry has been unable to gain traction in a specific community.

Prayer is the weapon that the Lord uses to break through and expose a false worldview or mindset. It is the tool that the Lord will use to build good and godly mindsets.



The Scenic Route

(Preferably done as a group)

Ask the Lord to reveal if strongholds are blocking the ministry of the deacons (or other ministries) within your church and community.

- Spend 2-5 minutes in silence, listening to the Lord about this.
- Share what you hear. It could be a picture of something, or a phrase, Scripture, or even a remembered fragment of a conversation.
- As each person shares what they heard, it is like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that may give a fuller picture of what is taking place.
- Make sure to discern if the words being heard are from the Lord and not just our minds.

The following 4 questions may help do that:

1. Does it give glory to Jesus Christ in the present and in the future?
2. Is it consistent with the intentions and character of God as revealed in Scripture?
3. Do other people who are filled with the Holy Spirit have a confirming witness?
4. Is there confirmation in objectively verifiable events or facts?

If the Lord does not reveal anything to you, don't start looking for something. Simply allow the Holy Spirit to guide you and direct you as you pray. If there is nothing, then give thanks to the Lord for that. If the Lord does reveal something, you may need to spend some additional time in prayer asking the Lord to give you a strategy for dealing with the stronghold.



DETOURS

OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL
ROADBLOCKS IN
MINISTRY

Devotion #10 - The Enemy's Camouflage


Read: Acts 27 (the Story of Paul's
Shipwreck)

November 2021

The apostle Paul often found himself contending with the enemy throughout his ministry. The devil established strongholds, which are human systems compromised by the enemy. These strongholds attempted to hinder Paul from preaching about Jesus. They blocked Paul's efforts and even tried to take his life. God empowered Paul to see beyond the physical reality of the human systems to the spiritual forces at work, as it were, behind the scenes. This is why he told the Ephesians:

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12)

While Paul was able to discern what was happening, most of the people around him were unaware. The enemy blinded them, so they could not see the truth of what was happening or what the enemy was planning. It was as if the enemy had an invisibility cloak or a camouflage net that covered the stronghold. It prevented people from seeing the reality of the enemy's plans.

We can see this blindness in the Roman centurion who escorted Paul to Rome. Paul knew he was going to Rome; Jesus had told him (Acts 23:11). But Paul would have to endure two years of imprisonment before the way was opened for him to travel. The enemy was able to use a stronghold around Governor Felix to keep Paul in jail. The enemy used Felix to block Paul from traveling. However, it backfired as Paul was able to use this time to write some of his letters. Once Felix was replaced by the new governor Festus, Paul seized his chance. He appealed to Caesar and was shipped off to Rome. He was placed in the care of a Roman centurion. 



Rest Stop

For Paul, there was a time delay of two years from when God told him he would be going to Rome to when he finally began his journey. Have you ever experienced a delay between knowing what God wants and being able to do it? What was the cause of the delay, and how did you feel during this time?

Devotion #10 - The Enemy's Camouflage [pg. 2 of 3]


The devil did not want the gospel reaching Rome, and again he tried to prevent Paul from getting there. Delays happened, and time was lost, which is often a strategy of the enemy. The centurion could not see the enemy's strategy. But Paul was aware of the journey becoming increasingly dangerous and challenging. He tried to warn the crew and the centurion that things were not good (Acts 27:10), but no one listened to Paul.

The centurion was blinded to the danger as was the ship's captain, who you would have expected to be more knowledgeable about the hazards of winter travel and the potential for storms. The enemy prevented them from seeing the danger. Perhaps the enemy stirred up pride in the captain to think he was more skilled than he was, or maybe it was greed for the payment he would receive from his cargo. As a result, they found themselves in the middle of a massive storm, which kept the ship tossed about for two weeks.




Rest Stop

How has praying about a challenge that you have faced made a difference in that situation?
How did praying change you?

While Luke does not tell us what Paul was doing during those 14 days at sea, prayer and intercession were probably an essential part of his days. Perhaps Paul was praying, as Elisha did for his servant (2 Kings 6:17). Was he praying for the eyes of the centurion to be opened? Or perhaps he used the time to witness to the centurion about Jesus. We don't know. But when the decisive moment came, the centurion chose to listen to Paul and not his fellow soldiers. The prisoners were not killed, but instead, as Paul had predicted, every person made it safely to shore. 

Our enemy, the devil, still works through these demonically influenced human systems, and he still seeks to camouflage them so that they can't be seen. He blinds people to his plans and schemes. Hindsight can show us how well this blinding works.

For example, in the late 1930s, people inside and outside of Germany could not see the dangers of Adolf Hitler and the ideology of National Socialism. Even as the truth began to be exposed, many were unable to accept it. The enemy had blinded them. 

This demonic cloaking or camouflage of the enemy prevents those inside the stronghold from realizing what they are involved with. ...



Rest Stop

What are some of the challenges you are facing as a church diaconate? Are these challenges just physical, relational, or could there be a spiritual component?

Devotion #10 - The Enemy's Camouflage [pg. 3 of 3]

At the same time, it prevents those outside from seeing the real danger and the purpose of the stronghold.

Fortunately, we are not defenseless, nor are we unaware of how Satan operates. The Lord has given believers the mighty weapons of prayer and intercession. Through prayer, demonic cloaking can be pierced and exposed. The truth can be revealed so that the stronghold can be dismantled and God's plans and purposes are not hindered.

Prayer can reveal a stronghold that has been hidden, and the Holy Spirit can give strategies for prayer and action that can contend with and demolish Satan's schemes so that God's purposes and glory can be revealed.



The Scenic Route

(Preferably done as a group)

Think about a challenge that you face as deacons within your church or community.

- Take some time together to pray for this challenge.
- Ask the Lord to show you what's happening spiritually that you are not able to see.
- Pray for the Lord to pierce any demonic cloaking that hinders you from seeing what the enemy might be doing
- Spend some time quietly listening to what the Lord is saying to you. Invite him to give you directions about how to pray for the circumstances.
- Then pray as the Holy Spirit leads you.

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OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL
ROADBLOCKS IN
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Devotion #11 - Eyes on Jesus

Read: Hebrews 12:1-3

December 2021

I remember as a child the year that Manchester United won the FA Cup and how the following week we lined the street for the welcome home parade. The team came through on an open-topped double-decker bus with a trophy lifted high at the front. The soccer team waved as the fans who lined the route cheered.

In Hebrews 11, we see a similar type of parade; not with sportsmen and women, but a parade of the heroes of faith whose stories of their faith and trust in Adonai their God fill the pages of the Old Testament. Heroes like Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Joseph, Moses and Joshua are reminders of God's faithfulness throughout history.

But then, as we turn to chapter 12, we see the scene changes, and now instead of us being the spectators cheering on the spiritual heroes of faith, those heroes step into the role of supporters, and the focus of their attention is upon us! They are the cloud of witnesses watching, cheering and encouraging each one of us as we face the challenges of life.

The writer of this letter to the Hebrews urges his readers to run the race ahead of them because they have the support from this vast host of those who've already completed their race. With their help, the writer instructs us to keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus and run! 🌲🌲🌲

We fix our eyes upon Jesus because he is the author and the finisher of our faith. Jesus is our Redeemer, Saviour and Lord. As our attention is focused upon him, he will give us the guidance and direction we need to run the race well, and he sends the Holy Spirit to empower us to do what he calls us to do.



Rest Stop

Who are the heroes of faith in your life? How have they helped to shape and prepare you?

Jesus endured the pain and agony of the cross, taking upon himself our sin and brokenness and receiving the just punishment for our sin. Yet, the writer reminds us that the reason he

went through the agony of separation from the Father and death by crucifixion was so that we might be welcomed into God's family as God's sons and daughters. With this in mind, the writer encourages each of us to get rid of whatever it may be that holds us back – the sin and brokenness in our lives. Instead, with eyes fixed on Jesus, press ahead even with joy amid the challenges we face.

The challenges that are faced by deacons can be tiring and draining, both emotionally and spiritually. When faced with difficulties that seem to be getting in the way of God's Kingdom-reality being manifested, it can be easy to become discouraged. When individuals choose to remain within the prisons of their own brokenness instead of embracing the freedom and healing of the gospel, we can become despondent. When the blockages and

challenges of establishing a new ministry or supporting existing ministry efforts become insurmountable, we are tempted to give up. 🌲🌲🌲



Rest Stop

What are the things that can distract you and prevent you from doing the work of building God's Kingdom?

It is at these times that the words from Hebrews 12 can be a lifeline and our strength. As we fix our eyes upon Jesus and upon the central truths of the gospel, we find the truth and the courage not to grow weary or lose faith but instead to pursue the work God has called us to do.

Prayer and intercession make the connection between our faith and reality. It is through times of prayer that our eyes can become fixed and focused on Jesus. In prayer, he will speak to us about our specific situations. He gives guidance and wisdom for how to deal with the blockages to his Kingdom expansion. 🌲🌲🌲

As we come to the end of this series of devotionals, it's important to remember that Jesus will be our guide. Through the Holy Spirit, he can and will direct us to be able to do everything he wants us to do. All we need to do is fix our eyes upon him.



Rest Stop

What are the challenging situations that you are experiencing personally and as a diaconate? (Optional: Write them down and pray about them.)

[over->]



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OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL
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Devotion #11 - Eyes on Jesus [pg. 3 of 3]

Dec. 2021



The Scenic Route

(Done as a group)

Take some time to think about some of the **positive outcomes** of your ministry as deacons.

- Share how the Lord has helped you to make a difference in your church and community.
- Consider writing these stories down as an encouragement for challenging seasons.

Spend some time fixing your eyes on Jesus as you pray into some of the **current challenges** you face.

- Give time to listen to the direction and guidance that the Holy Spirit may give you for the specific challenges that you may face.

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