

## MY BACK TO SCHOOL DEVOTIONAL

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## BACK TO SCHOOL DEVOTIONALS

#### New Beginnings

A new school year is a time of new beginnings. Each new school year can be seen much like the beginning of a new season. Just as each season starts a new cycle, be it one of cold, or one in warmth, the new school year ushers with it, new offerings of a metamorphosis. It is a time of advancement in learning, a time to develop new experiences, a time to forge new friendships, or even a time to abandon but reflect on old habits.

In accordance with all the changes going on around you, so too does it offer opportunities to reset and reinvent yourself. 2 Corinthians 5:17(ESV) tells us "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." Think about your spirituality, and what type of relationship you want to share with Christ. How can you pursue a deeper, more connective union with Christ? Perhaps as you begin your day, you can set aside a few minutes to devote yourself to prayer? Philippians 4:6-7(ESV) asserts, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with

thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Prayer is an excellent way to build your spiritual contour! As you focus and begin to set a routine in prayer, you will strengthen your faith and grow in alignment within Christ. Proverbs 15:29(ESV) states "The Lord is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous."

As you look inward and renew your strengthened walk with Christ, your outward personability will be a testament to your peers, teachers and faculty, as well as your family, and all those you come into contact with, both directly and indirectly. We see this in Psalms 18:28-30 (ESV) "For it is you who light my lamp; the Lord my God lightens my darkness. For by you I can run against a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall. This God-his way is perfect; the word of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him "

## BULDING CHARACTER

The growth you experience will begin to reach all corners of who you are as an individual. Over time, you and those around you will notice a change in how you behave, in the things that may interest you, and the way you process things in the way you think. We see this in Romans 12:2(ESV) "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." The more you practice your spiritual awareness, the more your desires will align with the desires God has for you. This is building character. James 4:8(ESV) reaffirms this by saying "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." The potential of developing your character is only uninhibited by your willingness to realize the capacity of your spirituality.

What desires could God want for you? What potential successes and victories could await through the glory of God? Perhaps you may ponder where you see yourself and what direction you want to head in this year? Setting and realizing goals not only academically and socially, but also spiritually are incredibly important in transcending to achievement. 2 Chronicles 15:7(ESV) teaches "But you, take courage! Do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded." While Psalm 20:4-5(ESV) ratifies "May he grant you your heart's desire and fulfill all your plans! May we shout for joy over your salvation, and in the name of God set up our banners! May the Lord fulfill all your petitions!" It is only through your spiritual journey that you can certify an assertive steadfast moral character, and through your character abiding will mandate both triumph but also the dexterity to navigate the commute to that fulfillment.

#### PRESENT YOURSELF

Whether you are in a new school or the same school as the year prior, have you considered how you will present yourself at the start of the year? Who will you spend time hanging out with? Do you have a particular reputation to uphold? Perhaps you consider these things socially, personally, and spiritually at various levels. As you walk with the Lord, you are called to exhibit the traits that reflect the Spirit – "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law," Galatians 5:22-23.

If you think about it, everyone is concerned with their identity how they see themselves, what sets them apart, simultaneously what group they fit in and can identify with, and how others see them. Hair, clothes, shoes, accessories, makeup - these are outward ways to express your identity. Activities, grades, goals, accomplishments – these are potential ways to build your identity externally as well as internally. But who were you created to be? "See what great love the Father has lavished on us. that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him," 1 John 3:1.

Your identity as a Christ-follower is not going to necessarily be easy to maintain, but it will be worth it. You will have to be intentional in how you present yourself. Romans 12:1 says, "Therefore, I urge you,

brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God-this is your true and proper worship." Why would you choose to do the hard thing, the right thing, the different thing? It's not to look good or stand out or be popular for being a rebel or to fit in - but because of your own personal and ever-deepening understanding of what God has done in your life and to redeem your life, your response to that mercy and grace, that forgiveness and love, that sacrifice and selflessness on Jesus' part because of that, you offer your life, moment by moment, to following God and obeying Him. Anything less than that sacrifice shows an incomplete understanding of what you've been given at the cross and what He is capable of doing in your life.

## OWN YOUR FAITH

"It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (John 4:42). Have you ever felt like you mostly have gone to church or participated in certain traditions and rituals because of the faith of your mother, father, grandmother, or someone else close to you – but you have not necessarily taken ownership of your faith and personal relationship with God?

No one else can live your life for you, and no one else has to deal with the consequences of your life choices for you. Many people, both peers and authorities, will offer or present advice to you. It is ultimately up to you to weigh that advice against the Word of God, and prayerfully seek the Father's Will for your life through the avenues by which He speaks. In the end, when someone gives you bad advice, whether intentional or not, they aren't the one who has to live with the consequences - you are - so it's better to own the responsibility from the beginning. In the same way, no own else can own your faith. It is up to you to pursue God, as He is calling you and has made a way for you already to realize your full potential as a human being. Remember that you are a Child of God, and that is different than just being a human. You have been given the rights and responsibilities of being His child, as

Romans 8:17 says, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

As Children of God, we each have our own unique stories that interweave into the greater story of His love and redemption. You are a vital part of the body of Christ, with your own talents to bring and your own experiences and insights. If you feel inadequate for some reason, such as your age, how long you have been a Christian, or anything else you tend to compare yourself with regarding others, remember that 1 Timothy 4:12 says, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity." You are called to be an example now, not just later when you have gotten it all together - which honestly is not really a thing, because life always has changing circumstances. Fully depend on God and allow Him to lead you where you are now in your faith journey.

In this way, the people in your life will see the difference between living your own way and living by and through faith in God. Pray for the opportunities to show that you live in a manner that reflects the Creator, Savior, Redeemer, and Mighty God you serve. 1 John 3:1 puts it this way, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him."

## I AM CREATED IN HIS IMAGE

What does it actually mean to be made in the image of God, or furthermore, to be made into the image of Christ? As the Creator, God originally formed us to be like Him in several ways. Genesis 1:26-27 says, "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

We reflect or represent God, yet we are not identical to or on the same level as God, even with the knowledge of good and evil which was gained shortly thereafter in Genesis. We don't know what God looks like in a physical form and no one does unless they were alive in era that Jesus was, but even then, He took on our form in order to relate with us.

Instead perhaps we should look at the fact that have a spiritual awareness and nature, we are capable of being rational, we have a will and can act upon our thoughts and desires, we are able to relate to one another, we are given a level of power and knowledge and dominion, and we are held accountable to the law as a moral standard. These aren't things that birds, reptiles, fish, livestock, and other creatures are ever described as having. This is how in the created sense we are made like Him.

But in the New Testament when being formed in the image of Christ is discussed, we relate this more to how we are formed spiritually after salvation. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." God has a plan of redemption, healing, and restoration on individual levels as well as for the creation as a whole. This part of the story was set in motion in Genesis after the fall, when the serpent was promised that there would be a Savior coming, which was of course fulfilled by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Let us remember as we go through life's trials and many various experiences to give God the glory for whom He has made us, and for whom He is still making us to be. Psalm 139:14 "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

#### I AM LOVED

Have you heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs before? It is a concept in the field of the study of psychology that says that we have certain basic human needs that must be met in order for us to realize our full potential as humans. Such needs include physical wellness things like having food, shelter, and clothing; a general sense of safety; love through family and friendship, a healthy sense of self-confidence, and then the motivation to grow and realize your goals.

While this is not a strictly biblically-based exploration of human nature, we can see throughout the Scriptures that God is love, and that love takes care of basic needs such as these. You can find security not in a well-paying job, in a close relationship, in a strong tower of a shelter or a healthy sense of yourself, but in the fact that John 3:16 tells us we are loved, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

So what kind of love is this? This isn't the love between friends, girlfriends and boyfriends, married couples, or even a human parent and child, but something even more steady, reliable, and deeply life-changing. Over our lifetimes, we will experience the desire to love and be loved, and often people will unfortunately end up disappointing us deeply – even people we greatly respect, admire, and love. Humans sin, and we disappoint not only each other, but ultimately and foremost our sins are against God. We have to understand that love between people might reflect God's love, but that God's love is different, better, and pure.

Jeremiah 31:3 tells us, "The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.'" Where in your past have you seen God's love demonstrated for you in this way? Even if you are a very new believer, you must know that it all starts with the cross, and then each of us gets to experience this love in our personal walk with Him. Pray daily that your eyes are opened to His work in your life so that you can add daily to your testimony of the great things He has done. Trust Him every day for what you need, for as 2 Corinthians 5:7 says, "For we walk by faith, not by sight."

### I AM MADE NEW BY HIS GRACE

Sometimes change seems impossible – we tell ourselves that this year will be different, this week will be different, that everything resets because of a date on the calendar or a slightly different set of circumstances that you can't control anyhow. While we are in control of our choices within every situation we face, we are constantly up against a struggle between the temptation to do things our own way or do things God's way.

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit is at work within each believer, and we are permanently and wholly changed by the grace we experience at the cross: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" 2 Corinthians 5:17. The rest of our earthly lives, after we surrender ourselves fully to Christ, are full of opportunities to learn how to be more like Him; we are constantly able to become more and more of who we were created to be as individuals made in His image.

You may have heard before that there is a difference between the meanings of grace and mercy. Grace is when we receive a gift that we don't deserve — eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord is grace, then. On the other hand, mercy is not receiving the punishment that we actually do deserve — not receiving death, eternal separation from God, also because of Jesus, who took on the punishment for our sins on the cross. Together, this gives us a more complete picture of forgiveness. 1 Timothy 1:9 "He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time."

God knows that humans are incapable of living perfectly. Grace is something we ought to not take for granted, but that is freely given to us even if we do. God stands ready to offer a way to be restored to all who trust in Him. He is faithful, even when we are not. He is generous and patient beyond human capacity, and He extends His arms in love to us all, no matter what we have done. It is then our honor to extend our arms to others in the best fashion we can imitate.

If you are discouraged by the patterns of your past choices or circumstances, remember Lamentations 3:22-23, "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Praise God for His steady, faithful, patient work in your life today and trust that what He has in store for you, He will equip you to do for His glory!

#### I AM KNOWN

We all have a longing to be known. Sharing experiences, inside jokes, adventures, good times and bad makes us feel like others know us to one degree or another. But if you've ever felt what is described as, "lonely in a crowded room," you know that despite being around people, no one really knows you fully. There is a longing in each of us to be fully known. Jeremiah 1:5 shows us that God knows us before anyone else does and more deeply than anyone else actually can – as He says to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

In the famous chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, Paul describes our incomplete knowledge versus God's omniscience (all knowing quality) in verses 10-12: "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." While on this earth we grow and mature, we have the opportunity to learn more about who God is, how He works in the

world around us, who we are, and how to relate to one another in deeper and more meaningful ways.

To be known changes our relationships. How does being known by God change the way you approach His throne in prayer, for example? How does this change how you process what you read in the Scriptures, or how you handle a difficult set of circumstances?

When it comes to your relationship with God or with others, what situations have you been in that have made you feel more known? What can you do to foster deeper conversations with your peers to help them feel seen, heard, and known and so reflect the love and care that God offers through true fellowship?

Consider your current friends, mentors, classmates, teammates, teachers, coaches, leaders, and even family relationships. Would you characterize your current relationships as shallow, deep, or in between? Whether you more often feel misunderstood, on the outside, or known and loved, you have the ability to extend better to other people and make a difference in their lives because of your relationship with Christ.

#### I AM CHOSEN

Have you ever watched the TV series, "The Chosen," or heard about it? It is basically a retelling of the Gospels in a format that we can relate to the disciples and those who closely interacted with Jesus on a more personal level as we see the life of Jesus unfold. Perhaps like the disciples probably wondered, have you also explored what it means to be chosen by God, for you today?

Originally, of course, the Jews were God's Chosen People. This was a very elite group in one sense, as this human family branch was the group that was chosen to interact with God in a special way throughout a major chunk of history. God chose them to show His work in the world to bring about a Savior, as He promised in Genesis. Throughout all of the ups and downs, broken covenants, complaining and disobedience. God still chose to work through Israel, and He never broke His side of any of the covenants He made. While the Jews ended up going into exile (as promised), the world was still waiting for a Savior.

When Jesus came to earth, we see that He chose a specific group of people to disciple and send out – those who were willing to listen, learn, and take on that responsibility from Him.

As Jesus ascended, He gave this privilege and responsibility to all those who chose

to trust in Him. 1 Peter 2:9 tells us that the body of believers fully represents and is made up of the true chosen people now: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

How do you practically declare His praises in your life on a daily basis? This goes beyond church on Sunday morning, for sure. If you recognize that you have been taken from darkness into His light, you won't be able to help but praise Him with your words, actions, time, money, thoughts, and desires.

Remember that you are chosen, that you are loved, that Jesus thought of you when He was on the cross, and that He wants you to let others know that they, too, can find His love and acceptance at the foot of the cross.

### I AM CONFIDENT

When do you feel confident? When do you feel proud of your accomplishments? While getting good grades, winning a game, or achieving an honor may give you a temporary boost, even these successes will not last forever. (Hint, after you apply for college or move into your adult lifework, not many will be considering what you did in high school to be especially relevant. Consider how you feel about what grade you got in math in the third grade today, and its current impact on your life... whether you got that ice cream party or not.)

As another example of the temporary nature of worldly success, you may find yourself fearful of not being able to maintain that success - that one slip-up could ruin what you've worked so hard to gain. But we aren't supposed to live in a state of constant fear: 2 Timothy 1:7 "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline." The things that matter in life are worth your bold effort, and while working toward temporary successes can build and refine your character and give you

opportunities to honor God, the achievements themselves are often not as valuable as the efforts and journey you go on to get there. James 1:12 explores what strivings have eternal value, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

If you still do not feel confident in your approach to your daily activities even after a "win," you may find yourself in a constant state of striving, and while striving to do your best is a great quality, this must be put into perspective with your main purpose in life, to honor God in everything you do. After all, it is God who is working in you to redeem you and ultimately shape you into His image! Philippians 1:6 says, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

So, keep running the race, as Hebrews 12:1 encourages us: "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Confess your sins, own your part in the hustle, and work steadily toward the goal.

## VICTORIOUS

Early on in life, our personalities show if we naturally tend to see things with a generally positive approach, a negative approach, or a moderately based realistic approach. While this can change over a lifetime, especially after particular life experiences and even after encountering Christ, there are those who certainly get stuck in the negative. They seem to also try to ensure that everyone else around them is aware of the negative potential outcomes of every situation, from something as small as a quiz to something as big as a career decision.

If you have ever been working steadily toward a goal and desperately wanted cheerleaders but found you mostly have surrounded yourself with very discouraging people, you know what a burden that can be. As Christ followers, we can encourage one another not because we trust in our own

strength and will, but because we trust in God's strength and will.

If you are called to a particular decision, commitment, or vocation, God will guide you through all of the necessary steps to move forward on that path. With support from others or not, confidence in your abilities or not, it really does not matter except that you have faith that God will work in your life and that only through Him will you have victory over sin, obstacles in your way, and even death. Romans 8:37 "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

## I KNOW THE TRUTH

The word "truth" can bring, well, let's just say many strong emotions, or at least it can bring passionate debates. Experiences, feelings, opinions, and perspectives work together to make a personal worldview, which is important to develop carefully. If you accept a particular concept as validated knowledge about how the world works, you act on it, and you will in the end be accountable for both your thoughts and actions. This will happen whether you are aligned with the truth, or whether you are totally off base. (Malachi 3:6 says that, "I the LORD do not change," and similarly, Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." As Jesus calls Himself the way, the truth, and the life in John 14:6, and the Word in John 1, we can also assume that the Word of the Lord also stays the same throughout the tests of time.)

In order to approach the world as God has intended, you must spend time in prayer, allowing God to develop a fully formed worldview within you. John 14:26 promises us that "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

This fully formed worldview is based on the Truth of God's Word. Daily studying, dwelling on, memorizing, and talking about the Word helps you form your own convictions, understanding of God, understanding of yourself, and the bigger picture of how God is at work in the world. If you aren't reading the Word on a regular basis, your worldview is being shaped and affirmed by other sources. John 8:31-32 says, "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

The world thinks that the Word is restrictive, but the way you live in freedom will speak volumes. Galatians 5:1 says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

While many people struggle through their lives with trying to hold onto ever-changing trends, concepts, and the idea that they can be seen as desirable, powerful, or influential in the eyes of others (whose opinions are as permanent as sand), God promises us a solid-rock foundation. Read Matthew 7:24-29, for which the key verse is verse 24, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

# I CAN HAVE PEACE INSTEAD OF ANXIETY

Anxiety comes in many forms – perhaps you experience anxiety before a big test, before a big game, thinking about social situations that may go sideways, about misunderstandings, about the general future. Many situations like this bring on temporary feelings of anxiety.

According to the Psych Central website, "More than 31% of U.S. people will experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their lifetimes." That's about one out of every three people. Some forms of anxiety are

- generalized anxiety
- social anxiety
- panic disorder

Anxiety that persists and becomes a driving force in your mind and heart is a problem. Don't skip over this verse if it is familiar to you, but rather look at it with a renewed perspective. Philippians 4:6-7 asks a lot of us, but if you think about it, this

is a calling to a way of life: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." When we really believe God in the situations we face, we don't have to worry about things with the same intensity and in the same manner; we know He is in control and His Will will be done

If you are anxious about anything today, spend some time giving it to God in prayer. Read Scripture and pray through the passages that apply to your current circumstances. Remember that God is always with you. Hebrews 13:6 says, "So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

#### NEVER **ALONE**

Being alone scares some people. Other people enjoy being alone. Some people actively avoid being alone, while others just struggle to find time where they can be alone.

Are you an introvert? This means that perhaps you "recharge" from having a chance to process your own thoughts and feelings without the input of others. If you are more of an extrovert, you may feel energized and refreshed after spending time with a group of other people. Some people have described people who can be a bit of both as "ambiverts." Most people do not wish to be alone indefinitely, though. (Covid showed people various levels of isolation.) And even the most extroverted person can enjoy a peaceful time of solitude. It's healthy to be able to incorporate both social activities and time alone in life. Unfortunately, there's a temptation to pack your schedule so full that you can't have time to process things like:

- Big decisions
- Losses
- ✓ Goals
- Dreams
- → Relationships
- → Spiritual health
- → Physical health
- ✓ Mental health
- **✓ Emotional health**
- ✓ Etc.

No matter what you're going through, or who does or does not go through it with you, there is one thing that you can definitely count on: God is with you, and you are never alone. Even when you have doubts, fears, pain, can't distinguish His voice, or feel lonely due to lack of fellowship, God has a plan for you, sees you, hears you, and will continue to strengthen you through it all. Deuteronomy 31:6 "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."

In order to develop good rhythms in your life, you will need to consider what your

limitations are for each season. While an activity may have made sense to participate in for one season, it may detract from your relationship with God, involvement in your church community, or times you need to self-reflect and evaluate in this season. Exodus 20:11 models rest and that God created order for our lives: "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

Different seasons may bring new opportunities, but this also brings chances to practice saying no when you need to. The "fear of missing out" has led more than one young person to make choices they regret, but we must trust that walking with God will lead to no regrets – just lessons learned.

Often youth is a very social season, and there is a temptation to make fun of others if they seem to be more introverted, while extroversion is celebrated. Embracing that everyone has different levels of energy and different levels of comfort in groups, plus as many ways of processing life as there are life situations, just makes you able to encourage others better. Hebrews 3:13 asks us to "Encourage one"

another daily, as long as it is called 'Today,' so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." Sin tries to make us believe that we can feel better about ourselves by putting others down. Sin tries to convince us that we are invincible and that dabbling with sin, we can get away without any consequences.

Dwell on this passage as you think through your schedule this semester, this year, and this season.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal: a time to break down, and a time to build up; time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace."

#### BE A **LIGHT**

In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus calls us to be a light in the darkness. What does it mean to be a light?

- Your decisions won't always match what your peers' decisions are
- ✓ Your decisions won't always match what those in authority might choose (yes, sometimes you will have to oppose those in authority if they oppose the Word of God)
- Your decisions will match up with what God's Word says and what the Holy Spirit prompts you to do
- Your words and actions will uplift and encourage others
- Your words and actions will point to the Gospel / the cross

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

When you are a light, you bring hope to people who can't see a way through dark and trying times. John

3:19 tells us, "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed." Light exposes the truth, and many people don't want to be exposed and vulnerable, because they are afraid that certain things they have done will catch up to them and make their lives feel unbearable.

You can reassure those who hear the Gospel that though bringing things to light may seem uncomfortable at first, it is better to deal with sin and call it what it is than to hide it and let it fester and grow. James 1:13-15 says, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." James warns the believers to not let themselves be deceived by sin. In verse 17, He says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." We are made for the truth, and to walk in the light!

#### AM I ENOUGH?

Young people (and even older people) are constantly questioning whether they are "enough." Strong enough, attractive enough, seen as cool enough, popular enough, intelligent enough, sophisticated enough, mature enough, powerful enough, influential enough, talented enough, accomplished enough... the list can go on and on. There's a joke that goes around about young adults sometimes look around the room to see if there's someone more adult than them to handle a tough situation that has come up sometimes we all feel inadequate to face what we need to face.

So what is the solution? How do we know if we are enough in any given aspect of our lives?

Bad News: You can never be good enough, as in holy enough – but guess what?! What Jesus has done for you is enough. Ephesians 2:1-3 describes us before Christ makes us come to life very fully. "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts."

If that doesn't take away any hope of doing enough to be seen as good in God's eyes, then this next part ought to make it clear that it is God's grace alone: verses 8-10 say, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. 10For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Good News: You are equipped to do what God has called you to do.
Colossians 2:10 says, "And in Christ you have been brought to fullness.
He is the head over every power and authority." And having all power and authority, He certainly knows what's what; if He calls you, He knows you have what it takes to fulfill that which is your life's purpose.

At the time that Esther 4:14 took place, I can imagine that Esther was feeling scared for her life, her family, and her people. But her cousin said to her, "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

Ask yourself the same thing – Who knows? Maybe you were made for a time such as this, in the place in which you are.

## WHAT IS A WITNESS

The Oxford Dictionary states that a witness is someone who "sees an event, typically a crime or accident, take place." Cornell Law's website adds, "A witness is someone with firsthand knowledge of an event."

So when you as a Child of God witnesses to someone, you are simply recounting the things that God has done throughout history which are recorded in the Scripture, the things that God has done in your own life, and perhaps also the things that God has done in the lives of others you are in Christian community with. Every Christian can start with the cross, and their personal salvation, no matter if you were saved as a four-year-old, yesterday, or a year ago.

You may have heard of, "The Great Commission." This is when Jesus addressed the disciples (despite there being some doubt, see Matthew 28:17). He gave them reassurance that He was the Savior, God's Son. Matthew 28:16-20 "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." This was big — not just some authority because He was a leader, but all authority. After all, He had just conquered sin and death! He promises that He will be with us always.

He continued, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Making a disciple may look like meeting up with someone to talk about doubts, fears, nagging questions, and seeming evidence against believing God. Making a disciple doesn't have to be a one-on-one experience, though. You can meet as a group, on your school campus, or find a space at a coffee shop, your church, a home, a park, etc. Sometimes this may be formal meetings, and sometimes you may help someone grow as you're just hanging out. Pray for those you feel called to disciple both for opportunities and for growth for all involved. Go straight to the Word to check things out whenever possible. Talk about baptism and what it means. Talk about church fellowship, serving the body of Christ, participating in Bible studies, taking communion, and any other traditions and rituals you may have at your local church(es) in which you are involved. Learn from each other whenever possible! As Proverbs 27:17 says, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."

You are a witness when you tell about what God has done and join in His work today!

#### A WORKMAN NOT **ASHAMED**

One of my favorite church programs is a Scripture memory based club that runs from age 2 through high school. As a teen I went through the 7th to 12th grade books and explored many relevant topics with biblical truths, and I also went back and completed the 3rd through 6th grade books. To complete the high school curriculum, beyond the basic lessons and memory verses, I had the opportunity to write a brief summary of each of the 66 books of the Bible as I read each one, which is very helpful for understanding how each one brings a different aspect of God's character. That was in fact the first time I had read the Bible from cover to cover, though over a four year period. I encourage you to do this sometime if you have not!

The AWANA program was started in 1950 and founded on the verse, 2 Timothy 2:15, which says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." This is where the acronym comes from – AWANA stands for, "Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed." Found in 133 countries across the world, teens everywhere commit to memory verses that they can draw upon for the rest of their

lives. Whether you have access to such a program or not, dwelling on the Word and choosing to memorize verses regularly can be a very awesome spiritual discipline to add to reading the Word, prayer, meeting together, service, etc.

You are a worker for Christ. As you go about your work which He has called you to accomplish, know that you have nothing to be ashamed of if others mock you, reject you, or argue without really listening. There will be those who are ready to hear the Word, and there are many people who are desperate for the hope that only Jesus can bring to their lives. John 4:35 says, "I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."

# MY BACK TO SCHOOL DEVOTIONAL SEPTEMBER 2023