

It has been said that it only takes 21 days to form a “habit.” A habit is a pattern of behavior that has been picked up and occurs automatically, often called an “addiction.”

It is our prayer that over the next 21 days, through reading God’s Word, spending time with Him, & applying His truth to your life, that you will develop a spiritual *addiction* to His presence. That it would become a *habit* for you to spend time with God daily.

Through this devotional, and God working through His spirit within you- may you always have a spiritual hunger for more of Christ and may you be challenged to put your faith in action daily.

We are praying for you and we believe in you as the future of your generation!

Day 1

One man challenged another to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only for a brief lunch break. The other man had a restful lunch and took several breaks during the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised and annoyed to find that the other fellow had chopped substantially more wood than he had. *"I don't get it," he said. "Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did." "But you didn't notice," said the winning woodsman, "that I was sharpening my ax when I sat down to rest."* (Source unknown)

If you're like me, sometimes it seems that dealing with the world is like chopping wood. It's hard work, it takes time and concentration, and in the end you never get as far as you thought you would. Then on top of that, there never seems to be time to rest. Our to-do-list, deadlines, relationships, and multiple activities keep us on a mad dash that would make a rabbit tired. We rush out of bed and play slave to the schedule until we drop back into a restless slumber.

In other words, our axes are getting dull. Without any time for sharpening, we accomplish less and less with the same effort, until soon we just get used to the idea that we can't cut it like we used to. But then there are other believers who seem to have found some kind of 'secret'. They seem content with their lives, they handle things well, and they rarely seemed stressed out.

Guess what? I'll let you in on their secret. Ready?

The secret is that there is no secret. In fact it's spelled out in God's word. For example:

- *Quiet down before GOD, be prayerful before him. Don't bother with those who climb the ladder, who elbow their way to the top. (Psalm 37:7)*
- *Be silent, and know that I am God! I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world. (Psalm 46:10)*
- *As often as possible Jesus withdrew to out-of-the-way places for prayer. (Luke 5:16)*

These folks have simply decided to obey God, and not miss the forest for the trees...so to speak. They take time out to sharpen the axe, which is why they are skilled at chopping through life the way God intended.

Perhaps you have been swinging your axe a little too long, and you need a rest. Not just any rest, but one with a purpose. In order to accomplish this, you will need to do five things:

- 1) **Get alone.** I mean really alone. No cell phone, no pager, as remote as possible.
- 2) **Bring a Bible.** Focus on a few select passages of Scripture like the Psalms or the Gospels.
- 3) **Pray.** Not the standard 'bless this food/help me I've got a test' type prayer, but the 'pouring out your heart' before God type. Act like you're talking to your best friend in the whole world, because you are.
- 4) **Listen.** When was the last time you just sat in silence and listened for God? My thought is, if Jesus needed to do it- you think we might need it too?
- 5) **Worship.** Praising God is a sure-fire way to get the blade razor-sharp, because it brings us to the place where we remember that God is God and we are not.

Of course, this is just my suggestion. The main point here is to take a time out, because if you don't, you could soon be chopping up the wrong tree...or something like that.

Questions:

When was the last time you really got alone with God?

Why do you think Jesus needed to 'sharpen the axe'?

How would your life change if you regularly applied the 5 suggestions listed above?

Day 2

Someone is looking for you. No, don't bother turning around looking, because you won't be able to see who it is. But someone is there, that someone is not giving up either. You will be sought out until the day you leave this planet.

And do you know what's really scary? This person knows everything about you. I'm not just talking about where you live, how tall you are, what your age is. We're talking the big stuff here. Like your darkest secrets, your deepest fears, and your highest goals. But that's not what this person wants or even needs.

He needs you.

I know I know...being followed is a very creepy thing. Unless of course it isn't really stalking. What if instead you were being pursued by someone who is trying to give you something of great value? For example, if you lost an expensive piece of jewelry that was picked up by someone else, wouldn't you want to be pursued by that person? If someone has an expensive item that I've misplaced, I want to be stalked!

That's exactly what's happening here, folks. You lost something much more valuable than a piece of jewelry. You lost your life by trying to do things your way, and someone is trying to give it back to you. That someone is Jesus Christ. If you have trusted Christ as your Savior, here is what the Bible has to say about you:

• *They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted. (Isaiah 62:12)*

Jesus sacrificed Himself on the Cross so that He could offer you not only life eternal, but life that is full. You wear the name "sought after", because Christ is looking to provide you with a plan and a purpose that is infinitely better than any plans and schemes you could devise on your own.

Here are Jesus' own words:

- *"My purpose is to give life in all its fullness. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:10-11)*

See the connection? He laid down His life so that you could have life in all its fullness. In other words, Jesus' death and resurrection provided a blueprint for your existence that is second to none.

But there is one catch.

You have to let Him find you. You have to get on your knees and let Him know that you are ready to accept His plan for your life. It may not be the easiest or most comfortable, you probably won't make a lot of money, but I guarantee it will be the greatest adventure you could possibly imagine.

Someone is looking for you. Now it's OK to turn around and see who it is, because you know who He is.

Questions:

Are you ready to accept God's plan for your life? Why or why not?

How does it make you feel to be "sought out"?

Who in your life needs to know that Jesus is looking for them?

Day 3

"The Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper." (Genesis 39:23)

Sometimes I think I have the perfect plan for my day. In my mind's eye I see everything coming together and working out in a precise and complete way.

Of course, those are usually the days that turn out the worst. Seems like oftentimes I try to do everything right, only to see it turn out all wrong. At those times there's a little nagging voice in my head that brings up questions like - "Am I out of God's will?" "Am I a bad person?" "Doesn't God care about my circumstances?"

Joseph must have had similar questions as he lived through the events recorded in Genesis 39. At one point, life was going extremely well for him. Yet in the matter of a few days, his world caved in. He woke up one day with a perfect plan, only to be kidnapped and sold into slavery by his own brothers because of their jealousy. Talk about sibling rivalry taken to the extreme! Then for years to follow, his life was one dreadful event after another. No matter what right move he made, trouble kept stalking him. For instance, despite his deep walk with God, commitment to obedience, and ability to resist temptation, Joseph was falsely accused of committing a serious crime against the wife of Potiphar, his master. Surely Potiphar would recognize who was telling the truth, right? Or at least God would make it clear to him since Joseph had such a great relationship with Him.

Nope.

Potiphar responded by throwing Joseph into prison. There he was--a good, gallant, God-trusting man decaying in a dark, dank, dingy Egyptian dungeon.

Was he out of God's will? No. Was he out of God's favor? Don't think so. Did he not have enough faith? Hardly.

In fact, here's the really interesting part: smack dab in the middle of Joseph's terrible circumstances, the Bible says that "The Lord was with Joseph" (39:21). God had been and was still working out His plan, and for a while it called for Joseph to be in an Egyptian prison. What seemed to be bad was actually good, because it was part of God's perfect plan. After all those difficult years, Joseph easily could have turned bitter. Yet instead he had the "big picture" perspective. Here's what he told his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20)

God used every detail of Joseph's circumstances to save an entire civilization.

Perhaps things don't seem to be going your way, even though you're doing your best to follow Christ. Don't throw a pity party for yourself, join the Joseph club and have full assurance that God will work things out!

Questions:

Are things "going your way" right now? Why or why not?

Why does God allow us to struggle through bad circumstances?

How would you be different if everything always went your way?

Day 4

"For you ignore God's specific laws and substitute your own traditions." (Mark 7:8)

This is what Jesus said to the religious folks of his day who were more concerned about their own reputation and power than about God's plan for life. This is also what Jesus would say to religious folks today who are more concerned about Christian traditions than Christ. They are called legalists, and you should be on the lookout for them.

It's been said that often traditions are designed to keep living faith of the dead (the saints and Apostles). Yet what legalists do is take those traditions and make them the dead faith of the living.

I could say a lot about how legalism has split churches and driven people away from Jesus, but all you have to do is ask a few non-Christians why they don't accept Christianity. Most of the time their response has something to do with the way they were treated by Christians, or the way they observed how we lived our faith.

Bottom line is this: you are saved by grace and sanctified by grace...period. The idea that you please God through behavior is a lie designed to get believers thinking that they can earn God's approval or something. It's the same old pride game, so if you're playing it - maybe it's time to start reading the Bible.

Isaiah 64:6 – All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

Galatians 2:21 – I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!

Galatians 3:10 – All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written:

"Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."

I know what legalists are afraid of...if people don't have a list of rules, they might go out and do anything they want- and they are right. That's just how the Pharisees kept their followers toe tapping to their tricky tune. Yet they missed the whole point of grace: if someone hands me a million dollars, will I turn around and slap him in the face? Heavens no! Jesus has given

me infinitely more than a million dollars, obviously I will live for Him...

The sad part is that legalists lose out on the greatest truth in the universe: Jesus loves me, this I know.

What "list" has been laid down on you that will supposedly keep God loving you? Is it regular devotions, secular traditions, etc? (Write your thoughts below)

This week, try erasing the list and making a new list filled with truths like these:

If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since God did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't God, who gave us Christ, also give us everything else?

Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? Will God? No! He is the one who has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? Will Christ Jesus? No, for he is the one who died for us and was raised to life for us and is sitting at the place of highest honor next to God, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? (Even the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can't keep God's love away. Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39)

Day 5

Wouldn't it be great to be great? You know what I mean- a famous person, an extraordinary individual, a legend in your own time. And it wouldn't just be about the press coverage, the media interviews, and the best seats at sporting events. Being great would be great because you would know deep in your heart that your life mattered. You would be able to justify your existence, confident that you had left your mark in time and space. But I guess being that kind of person is reserved for just a few folks. You know, the ones who are highly talented, extremely educated, and in the right place at the right time. The rest of the population has about as much chance of achieving greatness as going to the moon right?

I've got a radical thought for you- so pay attention because your chance at greatness is just around the corner. In fact it can start just as soon as you finish reading this devotion. You see, it all depends on how you define being 'great'. If that means popularity, money, or something named after you, then you're right- you are probably never going to have that happen.

But let me ask you- do you know the names of the rich and famous from just 100 years ago? They thought they were pretty hot stuff at the time, but now they're buried and took nothing with them. Maybe some things were named after them, but I'm pretty sure I wouldn't recognize most of the names if I heard them.

But there is another kind of greatness - one that the greatest of all talked about.

Here's what He said: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-28)

Here is a person who knows what He was talking about. Just for the record, here are the official results:

He was born in an obscure village. The child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled more than two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things usually associated with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty three. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing; the only property he had on earth when he was dead. He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

"Twenty centuries have come and gone and today Jesus is the central figure of the human race, and the leader of mankind's progress. All the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned put together, have not affected the life of mankind on earth as powerfully as that one solitary life." (Author Unknown)

Jesus showed us that we can all achieve greatness by considering others more important than ourselves. If we do that, we'll leave an impact that will last for eternity. What a contrast to the typical attitude of the "great" person!

Here's a quote for us to consider:

“Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.” - Martin Luther King Jr.

Questions:

Which kind of "greatness" are you pursuing right now?

How could you be a better servant to those around you?

How much is your heart "full of grace" and your soul "generated by love?"

Day 6

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Hebrews 12:13-14)

One day a pastor was busy writing his sermon when his little boy walked in and asked what he was doing. "I'm writing my message for the congregation, son". The child then asked: "Does God tell you what to say, Daddy?" The pastor replied, "of course He does!"- the youngster thought about that for a minute, then he asked: "Daddy, if God tells you what to say, then why do you keep crossing things out?"

By the way- why do we keep crossing things out? God does not give us the option of picking and choosing what we believe or don't believe from His word. Check out what Jesus said: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Matthew 24:35-36)

The statements of Scripture are not just words on a page or the ramblings of Jesus freaks.

They are the living, breathing, powerful Word of God. In fact, billions of years from now when the world is the dust ball formerly known as earth, the Bible will be as relevant and authoritative as it was when it was written.

The Pharisees were really good at picking out what parts of Scripture they liked, and what parts to ignore. Jesus' strongest words were towards those who would dare do such a thing with the statements of His Father, and try to pass themselves off as true believers.

They were the first to tell you they knew God, but they were also the first to 'cross out' the uncomfortable parts of Scripture.

Are there verses in the Bible that make you uncomfortable? Many people have a mental marker when they read the Bible, and as soon as the sword of the Spirit slices into their spiritual mediocrity, the pen starts flying.

What does a marker look like? It's in your brain, and the ink comes in the form of thoughts like:

"Well, I'm glad that verse doesn't apply to me"

"I don't think the pastor translated that passage correctly"

"That command was only meant for the people back then"

"There is no way that God expects me to obey that"

Perhaps it's time to put down the permanent marker and open praying hands to God. The Bible is the ultimate truth in the universe; it is the final authority for thoughts and behavior. It is applicable in all places for all situations in all time periods. Rejecting Scripture is like pushing away a lifesaver after it has been thrown to you. Apply the Book of Books, and you will have best of life.

Questions:

Do you tend to 'cross out' any part of Scripture?

What is your least favorite command in Scripture? Why?

Are you a different person today because of the truth of Scripture? Why or why not?

Day 7

"Crucify him!" they shouted. (Mark 15:13)

O.K.- let's do an exercise in self-reflection for a moment. Think about the past few days, and how people's words have impacted you. If you are like most folks, the regular response of a routine day deeply encouraged and/or discouraged- and one or two words may have made the difference between brave action and boring apathy.

Or perhaps there were things that you truly wanted to do, but decided against doing because of what people might say.

A missionary named C.T. Studd had great insight into the impact of opinions. Here's a story he told:

There once was a miller, his son and their donkey went to the market. The miller rode the donkey all the way and people exclaimed, 'Cruel man, riding himself and making his son walk' So he got down and his son rode; then people slang, 'What a lazy son for riding while poor old father walks.' Then both father and son rode, and people then said, 'Cruelty to animals, poor donkey.' So they got down and carried the donkey on a pole, but folks said, 'Here are two dumb animals carrying another dumb animal.' Then all three walked and people said, 'What fools to have a donkey and not ride it.'

Ever have a day like that? Especially when it comes to living the Christian life. As soon as you make a definite decision to serve God one way or another, I guarantee you will soon have critics of what you are doing. Let me illustrate:

"I think it's o.k. to be friends with non-Christians as long as they aren't influencing you away from God."

"Are you serious? Christians should totally avoid unbelievers and just hang out with other believers- preferably from their own denomination. I think that's in the Bible somewhere."

See what I mean? When you start communicating your convictions, get ready to be insulted and challenged.

So when it comes down to a fight between your beliefs and your buddies, who will get the upper hand? The Apostle Paul was aware of this battle, which is why he wrote:

I'm not trying to be a people pleaser! No, I am trying to please God. If I were still trying to please people, I would not be Christ's servant. (Galatians 1:10)

The point being that you can never make everyone happy, so why try? In fact, Paul takes it a step further to say that basing your decisions on public opinion is not only foolish, it is also a form of rebelling against Christ!

I would challenge you to fulfill God's calling on your life. Remember, the purpose of life is not to be wealthy, popular, well liked, successful, educated, good-looking, or even happy.

Jesus told us that life is about seeking first the Kingdom of God...

Perhaps it is time to start listening for the applause of heaven rather than the curtain calls from the crowd?

Questions:

What is God calling you to do right now?

In what areas are you listening to the crowd instead of Christ?

Is it ungodly to be popular? Why or why not?

Day 8

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Philippians 4:8

The definition of purity is, “being free from foreign or inappropriate elements, clear and true.”

Purity is not from the outside in, but from the inside out. Purity isn’t necessarily just physical, it is mental first. It says in Philippians to THINK on these things.

In Proverbs 15:26 it says that the thoughts of the pure are pleasing to God.

Thoughts become actions, actions become habits, and habits shape a person’s character. Nobody becomes an addict overnight. It is choice that is made over time.

The same concept applies with thoughts. These impure thoughts get engrained into our hearts. The Word says, “out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). So thoughts spawn words, just as negative thoughts spawn negative words.

The trick to overcoming this is to take our thoughts captive. We bring those impure and unclean thoughts to the obedience of Christ:

2 Corinthians 10:5 “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

Philippians 4 says, think of the holy, noble, and righteous things. We have the perfect example in Jesus. He was righteous, noble, and excellent.

Be kingdom minded; live for the eternal.

Jesus was the purest of all; he gave his life so that we could be the righteousness, the purity of God. It’s our job to follow out his commands to see fruit and blessings we will receive from it.

Questions:

What thoughts do you need to take captive?

What scripture will you use to replace them?

What do places, situations, or people should you avoid to keep you from thinking those thoughts and from acting on them?

Day 9

“Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.”

Psalms 24:3-4

Have you ever wanted something so bad, but it seemed so far away? When I played sports I wanted to be the best and get the starting position. I would do anything to get it. In the end, all that stood in the way of me not sitting on the bench or playing in a championship was how hard I worked for it. Every day I asked myself if I was giving my all out on the practice field, lifting weights, or running. It seemed like there was always something more that I could do.

Isn't that true in all life though? If you want good grades, you have to study and do homework. The outcomes we get in life depend on the energy we put into them.

God is the same way. Sometimes we put a lot of energy into reaching God by going to church, doing good deeds, and saying the right things, but He still seems distant.

The question of Psalm 24:3 is who wants to be close to God and stand in His presence? I know it seems hard to be close to God, but He tells clearly what we have to do to get there: have **clean hands and a pure heart**.

The first time I read this I thought God was telling me to wash my hands! But then I realized it was so much more than that!

What He is really saying is that **purity** gets His attention.

He doesn't want to be around darkness. He longs that we would live set apart and pure. A pure heart means freedom from anything that pollutes.

With all the distractions that surround us- money, clothes, fame, relationships- we often find ourselves weighed down with the cares of this world. We become so familiar with darkness that we don't give the light of God a chance to shine through.

God is challenging us to break free from all of our worldly distractions. When we do that with a pure heart, then He will draw near to us.

God is waiting for the people who will quit the world's way of thinking and come up to His higher standard of purity. Will you do what it takes to get there?

Questions:

How can you free your heart from things that "pollute" or get in the way?

What situations in your life need change so that you can have clean hands and a pure heart?

Do you believe that Jesus can take all of the darkness away if you just ask him?

Day 10

One day I was feeling sorry for myself (as I often do), so I decided to get into a debate with God. I made up a list of all the things that were wrong with my life, and all the excuses I had for not serving Him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Funny thing is, getting into a debate with God is not such a great idea. Here's how it went:

I said, "It's impossible for me to live for You."

He said, "All things are possible." (Luke 18:27)

I said, "I'm too tired to follow You."

He said, "I will give you rest." (Mt 11:28-30)

I said, "Nobody really loves me."

He said, "I love you." (Jn 3:16)

I said, "I can't go on facing each day."
He said, "My grace is sufficient." (2 Cor 12:19)

I said, "I can't figure things out."
He said, "I will direct your steps." (Prov 20:24)

I said, "I can't do it."
He said, "I can do all things." (Phil 4:13)

I said, "I'm not able."
He said, "I am able." (2 Cor 9:8)

I said, "It's not worth it."
He said, "It will be worth it." (Rom. 8:28)

I said, "I can't forgive myself."
He said, "I forgive you." (1 Jn 1:9 & Rom 8:1)

I said, "I can't manage."
He said, "I will supply all your needs." (Phil 4:19)

I said, "I'm afraid."
He said, "I have not given you a spirit of fear." (2 Tim 1:7)

I said, "I'm always worried and frustrated."
He said, "Cast all your cares on me." (1 Pet 5:7)

I said, "I don't have enough faith."
He said, "I've given everyone a measure of faith." (Rom 12:8)

I said, "I'm not smart enough."
He said, "I give you wisdom." (1 Cor 1:30)

I said, "I feel all alone."
He said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." (Heb 13:5)

As you can tell, I lost the argument, but I gained a whole new perspective! I guess sometimes when you lose, you really do win.

Questions:

Which excuses apply the most to you?

Do you take God at His Word?

What would happen if you applied these promises to your life each day?

Day 11

"Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Galatians 3:3)

If someone asked you "what is the goal of life?"- how would you respond? Some might say that life is meaningless, so why even set goals? Deeper thinkers might respond by claiming that the goal of life is found in understanding what gives life meaning, and once that is grasped, the meaning of life becomes accomplishing that goal.

Every day we are surrounded with the message which says that the goal of life is personal pleasure. If we take on that goal, then self-gratification becomes the driving force that gives our life meaning. At that point it is easy to take on the mentality that says: "We want everything that life has to offer, and we want it now!"

However, if personal pleasure is what gives our life meaning, then life without consistent pleasure is meaningless. When we allow personal pleasure to be our focus in life, we end up with a shallow and lonely life that falls apart when we discover that the shiny happiness coins of life eventually lose their luster. Those who follow the self-gratification path are like castaways on an island drinking seawater to quench their thirst.

As Christians our goal in life is simple: to love God and enjoy Him forever. God set up life in such a way that the paths apart from Him are a sure way to a meaningless and wasted life. Conclusion? We must share what gives our life meaning with others. We must demonstrate by word and deed that there is more to this life than the simple pursuit of pleasure. People need to know that they can find a goal in life that is outside of themselves, an everlasting purpose that transcends what the world has to offer. Jesus put it this way:

"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done." (Matthew 16:26-27)

Most teenagers have an idea of what they want to be when they grow up- which is a positive thing. Yet don't forget that God wants to be the center of our goals and dreams. He gave His life so that we could live the way it was intended to be. In fact:

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

What tends to happen is that we forget about God and pursue our own way without Him. We chase the temporary toys and lose our eternal reward, yet remember that God Himself lives within us through the Holy Spirit. When we try to live life without tapping into our infinite resource, we end up chasing the wind.

Let's get practical for a moment:

For those who would be doctors, what good is it to save a man from sickness and see him healed, only to die later and spend an eternity in hell? What good is it to build homes for families in this life, if in the next they will live in outer darkness? How pointless is it for a teacher to teach young men and women how to succeed in this life, if they fail the test in the next? If you become a famous musician, how futile is it to create music that makes them feel alive, and not share in truth that they are dead in sin? It is foolish to live a lifetime never tapping into our personal relationship with God and to never share the most valuable life saving information in the universe.

Chase your dreams and set your goals, but don't forget that the Author of dreams has a goal for you as well.

Questions:

Are you trying to reach your goals and find meaning in life through the Spirit or human effort?

Do you have any dreams or goals that need an eternal perspective?

Day 12

"I have loved you with an everlasting love..." (Jeremiah 31:3)

Notice the strange combination of wording in this verse? It's not "I will love you" or "I'm going to love you"...rather I have loved you- meaning not only has God loved us a long time; He has actually loved us before time was even invented!

Maybe you thought that when the doctor held you up as a brand new baby, God looked down and said "How cute! I think I'll love that little bundle of joy forever!" Or perhaps you were under the impression that Jesus didn't smile on you until you trusted Christ as your only hope of salvation?

Well perhaps His smile got a little bigger that day, but His love was coming your way before you even came your way.

So how does that make you feel?

I don't know about you, but that blows me away. God's love for me is the most constant and unchanging thing in the universe. In fact, it will still be going long after the universe is gone! You know what else? Stop worrying about the security of your salvation. You are God's precious jewel...is He so irresponsible that you would be dropped and lost? You are the apple of God's eye...is He so fickle that you would be subject to "He loves me...He loves me not" game?

Don't think so!

If there was ever any possibility of God losing His affection towards you, it would have happened a long time ago, because He's loved you for a long time. But don't worry, because the opposite is true- He grows crazier about you each day, and the engine of His emotion does not have a reverse option!

If we could only let just a little bit of that truth sink in, it would change our lives completely -
We wouldn't worry about "being good enough"
We wouldn't care as much about what people think
We wouldn't stress out about whether anyone likes us
We would always know that Someone cares
And so on and so on.

This week, try focusing on this truth, and see if it doesn't help you have a "lovely" day!

Questions:

On a scale of 1-10, how much do you feel loved?

How has God's love changed you?

What is your biggest worry in life, and how does this verse affect it?

Memory Verse:

Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:39).

Day 13

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35)

Real love. Christ-like love. It must not come naturally. Otherwise, why would Jesus have to make it a command? He must have thought that somehow, somehow, believers have the ability through the Holy Spirit to live a life of genuine love. Yet not only do we have the ability, we also have the responsibility. In fact, Jesus makes it clear that self-sacrificial love is the way that the world will know we are children of God. Notice that Christ did not say: "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you know many verses and have your theology solid..." or "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you attend church, speak in tongues, and avoid all sin..." He simplified it for us- love one another.

So how do we show this love? I believe it is expressed through our unconditional acceptance of people regardless of race, creed or color. Whether that person is kind to you, or treats you like dirt. Whether you agree with their lifestyle, or stand against it. All of these things are quite irrelevant when it comes to obeying God and loving others. If you set up any pre-requisites for loving others, then you are disobedient to Christ and ineffective in your witness.

Let's look at how this principle played itself out in the life of Jesus. In John 4 we find Him in a tense situation; He is a Jew, living in a land occupied by Romans. The Romans do not particularly like the Jews, and the Jews return their sentiment. Yet, when Jesus is asked to heal a Roman official's son, He does so immediately — no strings attached, no power plays, no political games.

Jesus does not hold grudges, nor does he require obedience before demonstrating love. He cares for people regardless of their personality, position, or possessions.

In Luke 9:51-56, Jesus and His disciples were walking through Samaria. Jesus was trying to teach a group of people who were rude and unresponsive. Ever met anybody like that? What is your typical reaction? His disciples' reaction was to ask Jesus: "Do you want us to call fire down from heaven and destroy them?" Jesus basically replies, "No way! Are you demon possessed?"

Evidently in Jesus' mind, anger, revenge, prejudice, and unloving attitudes are unacceptable and sometimes demonic.

I know that as Christians we are called to hold each other accountable. Yet we should not use accountability as an excuse to harbor hatred or indifference. As well, we should not expect those who do not know Christ to live as we do. Unbelievers need to be shown that they will be completely accepted by the family of God. This acceptance should not come because of any qualifications or actions on their part, but because God loves them. God loves people unconditionally. So should we.

There are people that you know who are lonely and don't fit in. Many feel ashamed and outcast for whatever reason. If we make anyone feel like an outcast because he/she is different, we do not live up to the example Jesus set for us.

If we check people out to make sure they're cool before we share the gospel, we are allowing our prejudices to interfere with God's work. This is a tragic mistake.

Often the error of non-acceptance turns people away from God and Christianity — possibly forever. They run as fast and as far away as they can in the other direction, seeking out other religions and organizations that will embrace them. At that point Satan and those he has deceived will stretch out their welcoming arms. If the enemy has the ability to "love" and accept people, then how much more should we! Remember, people will go where they are accepted and stay where they are loved. Is your world a place where people want to stay?

Questions:

Do you know any "outcasts" that could use some love expressed through acceptance?

Do the people in your circle of influence know you as a disciple because of your outward expressions of unconditional love? Why or why not?

Day 14

"When my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the Rock that is higher than I." (Psalm 61:2)

Most of us should now know what it is to be overwhelmed in heart. It is as though any bright side of life has been covered over in complete darkness. It feels like our lives were as a ship gliding effortlessly on the ocean, only to suddenly collide with unseen rocks below. Our emotions may be adrift and our minds tossed about with bewilderment, but those who have trusted Christ have a remedy.

Blessed be God, at such seasons we are not without an all-sufficient respite, Jesus Christ is the port for battered sails, the sickbay for cheerless pilgrims. We live in a low estate, which is why we need to look up to Him. He is higher than we are in every way. His comfort is higher than our confusion, His mercy is higher than our mistakes, and His love is higher than our hatred. It is pitiful to see people putting their trust in something lower than themselves; but our confidence is established upon an exceedingly high and glorious Rock.

What is it about our Rock that qualifies Him to be our security?

Our God is the same yesterday, today, forever. He never changes, He will always love us unconditionally, and He cannot do what is evil- God rocks!

Our God is all-powerful. The storms of life that overwhelm us are merely a small whisper at His feet; He is not disturbed by them, but rules them at His will- God Rocks!

Our God is all-knowing. He is more pained by the tragedies of life than we could ever imagine. His heart is broken; He can completely relate to what is happening in our lives- God rocks!

If you are trying to find comfort and consolation for your overwhelmed heart in anything else but God, you are on quicksand. Jump off and anchor yourself to the unchanging, all powerful, all knowing Ruler of the universe. You may feel like you are hanging by a thread, but if that thread is secured to the Rock, you have nothing to worry about!

Questions:

Where do you look for comfort for an overwhelmed heart?

When was the last time you prayed Psalm 61:2 to God?

Is there someone in your life who needs to know about the Everlasting God?

Day 15

“Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with action and in truth.” (1 John 3:18)

Love is a verb. Some of you may have heard this statement. It may not be very profound, but how often do we apply this to our daily lives? It is true that words are powerful. In James 3:4 we see that just as a small rudder determines the course of a ship, our tongues determine the course of our lives. How much more power do our actions have if actions truly speak louder than words?

United States President Theodore Roosevelt once said,

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; because there is not effort without error and shortcomings; but who does actually strive to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly. So that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

I don't know about you, but this quote makes me want to jump up and conquer the world. Imagine what it would be like if you forgot about what family may think, your friends might say, that you could fail, or anything else that will hold you back and you completely poured every ounce of who you are into the love of Jesus. It is definitely a “worthy cause.” What if it your legacy was that you were “marred by dust and sweat and blood?” You were never a critic. Your place was with the valiant instead of the “cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat?”

It can be.

What would it look like for you to be completely, totally defined by the love of Jesus and nothing else? You would think about and treat your family in a new way. You would have open eyes to see the hurting friend who sits all alone everyday, new faith to open your mouth and speak to that person, and new words that can change their life. Then, Jesus would use you to change another life, and another life. And then in turn, those changes lives would change other lives, and those people would change lives, and those changed lives would change even more lives. Before you know it, you've made an eternal impact far beyond anything you could ever dream. Wow!

Sound amazing? I think so. Sound hard? On our own, it would be impossible. But guess what? We aren't on our own. Romans 8 says,

“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or

sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

With a love like this, we can love anyone the way we are loved. With this love, we have already conquered the world. Let's take hold of it together!

Questions:

What can I do to show this love to my family today?

What action can I take to better love my people today?

What do I need to do to forget about the things that hold me back?

Day 16

"Do not be misled. Bad company corrupts good character." (1 Corinthians 15:33)

They influence your speech, dress, and mannerisms. They are your constant mirrors. They have a firm grip on your heartstrings, and oftentimes they are the difference between success and failure in the Christian life. Good ones can nudge you to victory. Bad ones can drag you to defeat. What are they? You guessed it...friends!

The bottom line is that the type of friends who form your inner circle will most likely determine how faithfully you serve Christ, and whether or not you make a spiritual difference on your campus. When Paul wrote today's verse: "Do not be misled. Bad company corrupts good character" - he was addressing a friendship situation.

The Christians at Corinth had friends who basically denied the resurrection. In other words, their main goal in life was to try and find happiness through partying, because there would be no judgment day. So these believers had friends who were pulling them in the wrong direction. My guess is that those Christians thought that they were strong enough in their faith to resist the bad influences of their friends.

Paul says- I don't think so...

So what about it? Are you being misled? Do you have as your best friends those who have Jesus as their best friend? If not, it's just a matter of time before your character is corrupted with the virus of spiritual compromise.

In the words of one pastor: "If you drop a white glove in the mud...the mud doesn't become 'glovey'...the glove becomes muddy." This is especially true in relationships. Christian teens that continue with godless friendships will themselves become godless.

Maybe you need to make some decisions right now about your inner circle of friends. Don't put it off! The whole direction of your spiritual life hangs in the balance...

Questions:

On a scale of 1-10 (1=bad, 10=good), what kind of influence do your friends have on your spiritual life?

Do you really think that "bad company corrupts good character?"

If your closest friends were put on trial for being Christians- would they be convicted? Would you?

Day 17

Too often in our lives we experience the hurt of discouragement and rejection. So often we feel as though nothing else could possibly go wrong, and then it does... You fight with a friend, you fail a test, you get fired from a job, you get cut from the sports team, you lose an important relationship, and your dreams and plans fall apart before your eyes.

It is so common to encounter painful times in our lives where God feels distant. It feels as though we walk the hard road alone, and no one understands the struggles we are going through. When disappointment comes, it floods our lives all at once, and defeat slowly creeps in until we feel like giving up.

Personally, I have struggled with discouragement in my life a lot lately. Every time I turn the corner I face more rejection, or someone telling me I'm not quite good enough. At least so it seems. I know people don't intend to make me feel that way, but the reality of it is, I just can't help feeling discarded and worthless. I catch myself buying into the lies that Satan desperately wants me to believe. He wants me to give up and throw in the towel. He wants me to think there is no hope for my life, yet God's word tells me otherwise. He desires to build character within my life, and mature me, so I can be more available to do His work.

Romans 5:3-5 says, "More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (ESV)

Even during the hardest and most disappointing times in our lives, God is creating Christ-like character within us. Suffering is a part of God's plan to make us more compassionate and loving. However, He does not make us go through the struggles alone, but walks with us every step of the way, and gives us strength to keep moving forward despite opposition.

In fact, in Deuteronomy 31:8, we learn, "The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

God also tells us not to give up because His plan is far beyond our comprehension; If something doesn't work out the way we expect it to, we must recognize God's sovereignty, knowing He never shuts one door without opening another, which is far better according to His plan for each of us!

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."(ESV)

Be encouraged, brothers and sisters. You are not alone in your trials. In fact, Jesus himself knows rejection greater than anyone else. He wants to mend your heart and restore you, so He can use you for something incredible!! Even if you don't understand why at the time, just wait, because He knows what is best for you!

What is God speaking to you? Write it below.

Day 18

Not even a sparrow, worth only half a penny, can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to him than a whole flock of sparrows. (Matthew 10:29-31)

How many times are we feeling pretty worthless because of circumstances beyond our control? Life can sometimes be unbeatable, but other times it gives us a 'beat-down'.

Perhaps this week you know exactly what I mean.

Good thing our worth isn't based on our circumstances or behavior, if it were I would have zero hope. Check out this story and see if speaks to your heart.

A well-known speaker started off his seminar by holding up a \$20 bill. In the room of 200, he asked, "Who would like this \$20 bill?" Hands started going up. He said, "I am going to give this \$20 to one of you but first let me do this." He proceeded to crumple the dollar bill up. He then asked, "Who still wants it?" Still the hands were up in the air. "Well," he replied, "What if I do this?" And he dropped it on the ground and started to grind it into the floor with his shoe.

He picked it up, now all crumpled and dirty. "Now who still wants it?" Still the hands went into the air. "My friends, you have all learned a very valuable lesson. No matter what I did to the money, you still wanted it because it did not decrease in value. It was still worth \$20.

Many times in our lives, we are dropped, crumpled, and ground into the dirt by the decisions we make and the circumstances that come our way. We feel as though we are worthless. But no matter what has happened or what will happen, you will never lose your value in God's eyes. To Him, dirty or clean, crumpled or finely creased, you are still priceless to Him.

Psalm 17:8 states that God will keep us 'as the apple of His eye.'" The worth of our lives come not in what we do or who we are, but by WHOSE WE ARE!

Questions:

Who or what determines how good you feel about yourself?

Have you 'checked in' with God lately with your issues and problems? Why or why not?

What is one way you could show your thankfulness to God for His love this week?

Day 19

Do you ever wonder why you exist? It is so easy to get caught up in the normal routine of your everyday life. It is easy to wander aimlessly, without much direction, hopes or dreams. We have settled into an ordinary life, and we live the way society tells us to live. But I am here to tell you . . . there is so much more . . .

Take for example, a baby. When they are in the womb, they are perfectly content. They receive all the nourishment, warmth, and life they could ever need. They cannot comprehend life beyond the womb. Their every move and breath is dictated by the umbilical cord. In fact, an unborn fetus is fully equipped with a good set of lungs; however, they have no use for them. It is an empty void or longing within them waiting to be fulfilled. They are to be used for another life beyond their current one. Similarly, we too, are intended to live in another world beyond this one. This earth is only temporary and heaven is eternal. We are mere aliens in a strange land that is not our home. We already know that we exist on this planet to serve Christ alone, wholeheartedly, no matter what the cost may be. However, we forget that our real dwelling place is unseen. 2 Corinthians 4:18 says:

"So we don't look at the troubles we can see right now; rather, we look forward to what we have not yet seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever." (NLT)

This world is so full of pain and suffering, but we yearn for the day when it will all be wiped away. Our hope is in a kingdom prepared for us before the creation of time (Matthew 25:34). Just as that fetus has longings to one-day use the empty void in his/her chest for something more, we too, long for the abundant life originally intended for us. We've lost the true meaning of life somewhere along the way, but deep down in our hearts and souls we know we want more than this world claims to offer. We know we were meant to live for so much more. Each and every moment on this earth must be spent living for heaven.

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Allow Him to use you while you are here, but remember, that He is preparing a place for you in heaven. So I urge you to, "... press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [you] heavenward in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14)." The burning desire that you experience deep down comes from the One who created you, as He is constantly drawing you to Himself. Do not deny that longing, do not look back, rather each and every day live for Heaven, knowing that craving will soon be fulfilled.

What is God speaking to you? Write below.

Day 20

The way it was told to me went something like this:

One fine spring day a father and his young son decide to go on a scenic hike in the majestic mountains near their home. After they had gotten up the trail a bit, the father began to tire out a bit, so the son walked on ahead- but he wasn't watching the trail too well, so he falls, hurts himself, and yells: "owwwwwwwie!" To his surprise, he hears the voice repeating, somewhere in the mountain: "owwwwwwwie!" Thinking it was someone making fun of him, he yells: "Who are you?" He receives the answer: "Who are you?" Angered at the response, he screams: "Coward!" He receives the answer: "Coward!" He looks to his father and asks: "What's going on?" The father smiles and says: "My son, pay attention." And then he screams to the mountain: "I admire you!" The voice answers: "I admire you!" Again the man screams: "You are a champion!" The voice answers: "You are a champion!" Now the boy is completely surprised and very confused. Then the father explains: "People call this ECHO, but really this is LIFE. It gives you back everything you say or do.

So what is your echo giving you these days? Or perhaps you have forgotten that this really is how life oftentimes works.

Think back on the last time you had a pretty rotten day, or even a good day for that matter. I'm willing to wager that many of the determining factors behind either one of those days had to do with what you were "shouting" at the mountains of circumstances around you. For whatever reason, you decided to portray a preponderance of nasty negativity in your words, attitudes, and actions- then suddenly you are surprised that it came back around like a battering boomerang.

No, I'm not talking about some silly notion like "Biblical karma"...what I'm trying to point out is the supreme importance of self-awareness as to how your behavior affects your life both in short and long run.

The Apostle Paul put it like this:

Don't be misled. Remember that you can't ignore God and get away with it. You will always reap what you sow! Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful desires will harvest the consequences of decay and death. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. (Galatians 6:7-8)

God wants us to serve Him every moment of every day, because when we start living just to please ourselves- life can shout back some pretty nasty things.

The other issue is that we often try to fix our problems by trying to change the circumstances around us. That's pretty much like trying to change an echo by moving a mountain...not gonna happen.

Next time try changing yourself first. Start out each day by pouring positive prayers and adding affirmative actions into your day- you may be pleasantly surprised at what God allows to echo back.

Questions:

Over the last month or so, what have the loudest echoes in your life said to you?

How much Scripture have you memorized so that you can shout more positive things?

Memory Verse

For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

Day 21

"Yes, He is very precious to you who believe." (1 Peter 2:7)

I have three questions for you...

What is precious to you? Perhaps that's not a word that you use very much, or maybe it's overused, so let me put it this way: what do you cherish? What holds the dearest place in your heart and has the highest value in your life?

Maybe the answer to that is not so easy.

We esteem money because of the power it holds and the freedoms it enables us to have. We consider our family and friends precious because of their love and companionship. We hold dear our plans, possessions, and personal happiness. So how do we gauge what we cherish the most?

For the believer in Jesus Christ, this question is supposed to be a no-brainer. The Bible says in 1 Peter 2:7 that the Lord IS precious to us who believe. Peter doesn't say that Jesus SHOULD be cherished, or HOPEFULLY WILL BECOME of value to us; He simply is. As all rivers eventually join the sea, so should all our passions flow into the preciousness of the Savior.

When did Jesus lose His rightful place as the most Beloved in your life? Perhaps your once vibrant spiritual life has become a howling wilderness with no signs of Christ to be found.

If so, let me suggest an exercise- Close your eyes and try to remember how it felt to know that you were absolutely forgiven, when you learned that the King of kings and Creator of the cosmos was scandalously in love with you. Recall how you felt when you realized that Jesus gave His very life so that you could spend eternity with Him. He was the first Person you spoke to in the morning, and He was your final conversation before bed. He was the obsession of your thoughts and the speech of your lips. You wept for those who rejected His free offer of salvation, and you raged against those who would dare speak ill of Him. Oh but that was rookie Christianity stuff. We who are 'mature' have a kinder, gentler approach. We have many relationships and dreams that now have become more precious to us - but He'll understand. (Really? "But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first!" Revelation 2:4)

Here's my last question: what would you do without Jesus? Perhaps familiarity has bred contempt for our Redeemer; so let your thoughts travel for a moment to a world without Christ.

For me, a life without Christ could not even be defined as 'life'. It would be a waking nightmare of loneliness, emptiness, depression, and hopelessness. I would have no perspective on my past, no joy for the moment, and no hope for the future...and that would just be the first hour of realizing He was gone!

Take a moment and imagine Jesus not being the centerpiece of your life. If that's not a heartrending mental journey, then you're on the wrong lifeboat.

Questions:

Are you willing to ask God to restore the joy of your salvation before you lose your first love?

What holds the prize for "most precious" in your life?

What is one way you can focus your thoughts and feelings towards Christ?