



Boost:

Peaceful Encouragement for the Frantic
First Days of School

A 10 Day Back to School Devotional by: Bethany McMillon

Introduction

Dear Teacher Friends,

This series of daily devotionals has been on my heart since I picked up a pen and began to write. This year, I'll step into my 17th year of involvement in the education system as a professional. My experience has been varied, but in every place, I've seen and felt the frantic frenzy of the start of the school year – orientation, pre-service days, classroom set-up, building new relationships and new routines, and family juggling. Though I'm always excited to begin the new year, this pace can leave me feeling uncentered and anxious.

This year, because of the state of the world around us, those feelings are even more heightened. We keep hearing the word "unprecedented." Somehow, that doesn't feel quite big enough does it? We can now add the physical safety of our families and students, the difficult need to plan for both virtual and in person learning in some cases, and changes in our school day that feel strange to the growing list of things that haunt us at night.

But there is one thing that hasn't changed: God's Presence. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. He is in our yesterday, our today and our tomorrow. He is our peace and our joy.

Let's choose to start this year peacefully, to focus on allowing God to use us in our classrooms – whether they be in person, virtual or around our tables. Let's commit to intentionally slowing our pace, even for just a moment, to connect with God.

Each day, for the next 10 days, I'll offer a Scripture, a story, an activity, and a prayer. I pray the moments you spend walking through the daily devotional will guide you into peace and centered within our mighty God.

Hugs, blessings and prayers God's mercy and grace – Bethany

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Day One: Our Schools

Since we first heard about you, we've kept you always in our prayers that you would receive the perfect knowledge of God's pleasure over your lives, making you reservoirs of every kind of wisdom and spiritual understanding. We pray that you would walk in the ways of true righteousness, pleasing God in everything you do. Then you'll become fruit-bearing branches, yielding to his life, and maturing in the rich experience of knowing God in his fullness

- Colossians 1:9-11, TPT

I shivered from head to toe. I was so cold I could barely write notes as I sat in orientation. No amount of "ice breaker activities" could break up the ice in my veins from the cold meeting room! During a break, a friend and I decided we would walk around the school perimeter outside to warm up. As we did, we caught up on summer and relayed some of our excitement and our concerns for the upcoming year. Our conversations turned to a prayer for the school. The room was still cold when we returned, but our hearts had started the year warm and ready for God to use us in our classrooms. Prayer walking isn't a new thing, but it is a powerful way to ask God to be present on our campuses.

Activity: Take a walk around the physical outside perimeter of your school. As you walk, pray for anything that comes to mind. Pray for the protection of the building. Pray for the protection of the kids inside. Pray for the neighborhood around the school. Pray against the fear and uncertainty that parents may be feeling. Be thankful for the chance to educate all our children.

Father God - We humbly ask you to be present in our school this year. Send your Spirit to protect the school and those that are in it. We pray for our protection and our families. We pray for the protection of the students and their families.

We pray that you would place a hedge of protection around our school. Protect it and those within its walls from the broken world around it. - Amen

Day 2: Our Leaders

Be free from pride-filled opinions, for they will only harm your cherished unity. Don't allow self-promotion to hide in your hearts, but in authentic humility put others first and view others as more important than yourselves. Abandon every display of selfishness. Possess a greater concern for what matters to others instead of your own interests.

-Philippians 2:3-4, TPT

The conversation in the meeting had turned tense. Each of us felt the pressure of every item on our to-do and to-teach and to-assess lists. Deadlines loomed. I felt the heaviness in my heart first, then the constricting in my throat as I tried to blink away the stinging tears. "This is not the place for this," I chided myself. My face flushed, and I whispered, "Excuse me for a moment."

It was my first year teaching on this campus and I desperately wanted to excel. I was overwhelmed, and now embarrassed at my emotional display. I walked quickly to the restroom, shut the door and leaned against it, willing the tears not to fall. I stood for a moment, then tried to gather myself back together. When I swung the door open, I was eye to eye with one of my campus leaders, who had been in the meeting. "You okay?" she asked. "Sure, I'm great," I answered, but my shaky voice and a few tears that sat on my eyelashes gave me away. With kindness in her eyes, she leaned in close. "You are doing great. Your kids are doing great. And never forget, we are all thankful you are working on our team. We will do this together." And we did. She was there every step of the way, and her kindness never wavered.

Activity: Pray for your administrators and leadership by name today. Ask God to bestow on them His wisdom, and a love for the teachers, families and children they will serve. Ask that they be given an extra portion of wisdom within their leadership roles in this time of crisis. Write them a note of encouragement or schedule a day in your calendar to write them a note. Consider adding them to your prayer list or scheduling a day each month to find a way to encourage them with a note or specific word.

Father God, Thank you for the leaders on our campus. I pray for godly wisdom to fill them - that they would know the power of servant leadership. Open my eyes to their positive traits and how I can support them. I pray that your Spirit would be evident in me, so that I can show them God's love. - Amen

Day Three: Our Teams

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them fall down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.

-Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, NIV

Teaching teams often become our families at school. One year, as I started at a new campus, I was hired after everyone else had started pre-service. The team was made of incredible, hard-working women who brought me into their fold as if I'd always been there. On my second day of work, hours before Meet the Teacher, they swooped in, listened to my vision for my classroom, each taking charge of a bulletin board or wall and my ideas, and made it happen. Before that glorious scurry of activity though, the team leader stopped us all, gathered us together, and said, "I think we are all believers and I think we should stop and pray for peace, for our team and that we would work today as though we are working for the Lord." We quietly held hands in the hallway and prayed for the day, the year and each other.

Activity: If there are other believers on your team, consider praying together today. If not, pray by name for each of your team members. If you know of their personal life, pray specifically for that. If not, pray that you will be a beacon of God's love into their lives this school year.

Father God, Thank you for the team you've put me on this year. We pray you will help us to be better together than by ourselves. Help us to notice when one is falling and be there to help each other up. Shine your light through us that others may see You. - Amen

Day Four: Our Words

She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

-Proverbs 31:26, NIV

Years ago, I stood in what felt like a royal wedding receiving line as I met the parents and students that would be in my room that year. My team and I were departmentalizing, and my mind filled with how I would share my love of reading and history with the 65 upper elementary kids that would darken the doorway of my classroom each day. I'd heard great stories of the kids coming up that year - funny, sweet, and full of personality. When a dad and son were next in line, I smiled and introduced myself. The boy shyly shook my hand and said his name. His name was one that rang a bell. The other teachers had gushed about this one. "Oh, I've heard such good things about you," I grinned, "I can't wait for you to be in my class." A smile spread across the boy's face and he looked up, beaming, at his dad. The dad grunted and rolled his eyes, "You must be talking about someone else. He's lazy and can't read. He's in trouble all the time, so get ready. I'm sure this year will be the same." The dad's words stung my ears and my heart. The boy's face fell and the dad pulled him away. It's a heartbreaking moment I'll never forget.

Activity: Our words and actions can't heal the hearts of kids in our classrooms. But we can intentionally choose life giving words. Today, read through your student list aloud as a prayer, place each child on the altar of our Good Father. Pray for ways you can protect the hearts and minds and physical health of your students.

Father God, You love the children on this list. You created each of them in your image, on purpose and gifted them in special ways. Open my eyes to how You see them. Use my voice and my actions to show them your love. God, I lay each of them at your feet (read the names aloud) with a humble request that my words would be kind and affirming to each of them. -Amen

Day Five: Our Students' Families

*And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices
God is pleased.
-Hebrews 13:16, NIV*

In one of my early years of teaching, I connected deeply with one of the boys in my class. He was spunky and funny but struggled with his learning. His mom and I had many conversations through the year. We built a relationship in which she felt comfortable sharing some of their family history and life.

Over the following summer, just before school began, I learned I would be moved to a new campus and was heart-broken I probably wouldn't see them again. On my new campus, there were many new families moving in and class sections (like mine!) were added even after Meet the Teacher. As I prepared to meet the students in my class, the principal warned me of several families who were upset about the changes in class assignments. One mom, in particular, had been very vocal about her dissatisfaction.

Bracing myself for the worst, imagine my surprise when the family from the year before walked into my new room! The younger of the two boys would be in my class. The mom later told the principal about being assigned to my class, "I wouldn't have thrown such a fit if I'd known it was her."

Activity: Pray again through the names on your class list, specifically for the families. Consider sharing first names or initials with special, non-teaching friends who will pray for them and their families.

Father God, Thank you for the chance to shine your light. Open my heart to each of the families that are part of my classroom this year. Open my eyes for ways to include the children who will be a part of my virtual classroom. Refresh my desire and ability to show them your love, give my heart the courage and my hands the strength only you can provide. -Amen

Day Six: Our Family Balance

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

-Philippians 4:7, NIV

Sunlight streams through the window shades. I stretch and open one eye to look at the clock. It's after 7:00 am. The house is still silent. I pull the covers back under my chin, close my eyes and mirror the still sleeping breath of My Beloved. Rest.

Saturday mornings feel different during the school year. For my family, they often are a stark contrast to the rushed weekday routines. We lavish in later alarm buzzes and a slower schedule. For me, drinking coffee from a ceramic mug instead of a travel mug is a welcome respite. For my growing too fast boy, restoration feels like no alarm, College Game Day on TV and catching up on video game news. For my beloved, the golf course is his place of Saturday morning solace. There are small things we do through the week to slow us down, too. Almost every evening, just before cooking dinner, I stand on our back porch, watch the dog run, let the lingering sunlight of the evening seep into my soul and breathe for just a moment. Taking just seconds to slow down can refuel our souls.

Activity: Think about a small, slow moment you could incorporate into your week to mirror this feeling. Consider a song that feels peaceful and play it each morning, or maybe it's a certain stretch, or watering your indoor plants before the kids wake up or ten minutes of reading. Commit to incorporating an unhurried rhythm into your daily routine.

Father God, Slow me down this week. Help me breathe in your peace and let go of the chaos that often comes with this first week of school. - Amen

Day Seven: Our Rest and Restoration

Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

-Matthew 11:28-29, NIV

We hear rest is for the weak. We hear barked commands to lean in and power through. But, in our hearts we know the frantic pace is not sustainable. Jesus tells us His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Replace the demands of the week with the gentle beckoning to sit in the presence of the Lord today. Worship. Build relationships with those closest to us. Breathe.

Activity: Go to church or set aside time to worship and read God's word today.

Father God, Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, to the world and for his example of going away to rest. Thank you for the grace and mercy you give. I worship you simply because you are You, because You are God of the biggest things in my life and the tiniest moments. - Amen

Day Eight: Our Work

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters,"

-Colossians 3:23, NIV

Thousands of words (maybe millions) have been written in the last years about teachers. This year, with the current state of the nation and world, the voices have been amplified. Our pay. Our workload. Our working conditions. Rough kids. Tough administrators. Those of us that are leaving the profession and why. Those of us that are staying and why. Teaching is hard – more difficult than ever before in the midst of this pandemic. Some days, we need to sift through the darkness, remember why we are called to be teachers, and choose to be the light.

I sat in the silence of my classroom. With the lights off the evening sun lit the room just enough to feel relaxing. I checked my watch, 20 more minutes until I needed to leave and still have time to beat my son home from his afternoon activities. I double checked my afternoon to do list. My plans were in on time, the necessary copies had been sent to the print shop, the stack of assessments had been checked and I was ready for new small groups to begin in the morning.

My email dinged and I glanced up to see a late email from a parent. I held my breath and hoped everything was ok as I opened it. I couldn't help but laugh out loud as I read. The email was kind and funny. It recounted to me a story her daughter had recounted with vivid detail and ended with a thank you. Teaching really isn't about to do lists (though they are necessary for me to get it all done!). It's about relationships and loving our people.

Activity: In your email, create a new folder. Title it "notes to remember" or "look at this on hard days." When you get an email that makes your heart smile this year, move it to this folder. When the world tells you teaching isn't worth it, open this folder and read why it IS worth it. Consider making a box or basket or folder for tangible items, too.

Father God, You gifted me with this work and assignment. I pray your strength and guidance as I work in this place as though I am working for you and not for man. You have gifted me with specific strengths for this place and this time. I pray I would use those strengths for your glory. - Amen

Day Nine: Our Peace

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

-John 14:27, NIV

God is calm, not chaos. He is peace and love, not trouble and heaviness. You are not enough for all that you'll encounter this year, for all that will be asked of you. BUT, God is! When Jesus ascended into heaven, He left his disciples with blessings of peace. This includes us, at this moment, as we start school!

There isn't a first day morning that I've ever walked in without nerves quivering and a lump in the throat making it hard to swallow. (Does anyone else get dry mouth when nervous?) Most years, this feeling continues for the first week or two as I reacclimate to new routines and new kids.

On this morning, I was loaded down – physically and mentally. One arm held my purse, my lunch box (with extra water bottles since first days with kindergarteners don't often include time for a refill), my planning bag (with extra deodorant for hot, summer recesses and game pieces for an activity I'd finished prepping only the night before), and finally in my hand, a coffee. In the other hand, I held the hand of my growing too fast boy. We walked together into my classroom. To an outside observer, everything looked to be in place, but my mind swirled through my list for the day. My boy gave my hand a final squeeze and brought me back into focus. A quick hug and a wish for a good day and he was off - a new day was beginning.

Activity: When you walk into your classroom this morning, leave the lights off for just a moment. Set all your things down and stand still for just a moment. Palms open, eyes closed. Invite God – the Healer, the Encourager, the Light unto your Path, your Ever-present Help in Trouble - to be with you.

Father God, you've placed me here for your purpose and I trust you in that. You left your disciples with peace. Fill me with peace only You can provide. - Amen

Day Ten: Our Remembrance

So, Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord.... And they are there to this day.

-Joshua 4:4, 9, NIV

As God led in the Old Testament, the Israelites were often instructed to build an altar to remember what God has done. It makes sense that we do the same. We can easily forget all that God has done when we don't make it a point to remember.

Sweat ran down my spine and my hair clung, wet, to my neck. Each of my tiny learners had been returned to their families via carpool lines and bus duties. Exhaustion had set in after school on this August afternoon and I silently wondered if I had enough energy to make it to my classroom or if I should pause for a nap in the hallway.

On countless afternoons, my teammates and I trudged inside following afternoon carpool lines. We'd collapse in a huddle, sitting inside the backpack cubbies in the hallway, too exhausted to move the rest of the way inside our classrooms. We recount the day's highs and lows. Often, we laughed until we cried, then cried until we laughed. We finished conversations too rushed to be completed during the day and reminded each other of the important things happening inside these walls – and encouraged each other to remember our lives outside the walls as well. These were moments of remembrance and celebration after long, hard days.

Activity: In your journal or planner, or out loud with a friend, remember where you've seen God's hand in the last few days. How has He provided for you? How has He lifted your head when you were weary? How has He guided your steps? How has He given you His eyes for a student or situation? Consider keeping a record like this through the school year and remember to set aside time to connect with others.

Father God, centuries ago you instructed the Israelites to build altars of remembrance. Remind me of all the ways you've worked so I can be thankful for them. -Amen

Conclusion:

Sharing this with you has been a gift! I can't wait to see what God does in your life and the life of your kids this year.

How else may I serve you this year? Please reach out, I'd truly love to hear from you.

Hugs, blessings and prayers God's mercy and grace – Bethany