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Rick Christian

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The One Year Alive Devotions for Students

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FOR DEBBIE

Embraced companion, called to travel on the same road in the same direction.

My prayers for you always spill over into exclamations of thanks.

Stand with me united, singular in vision.

Guard with me the heavenly treasures in our custody. Carry with me the light-giving Message into the night. Run with me hard to the finish, believing all the way. All that's left now is the shouting—God's applause!

FOR ANDREA, BRADLEY, AND TYLER

Precious children of high heaven and each an original.

You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride.

Live creatively.

Don't waver.

Stay on track, steady in God. May what he gives freely be deeply and personally yours. Pure grace and nothing but grace be with you!

FOR ASHLEY, ANNELIE, IVAN, AND DANIELLE

Cherished God-seekers, woven into a tapestry of love, each strand taut with hope.

I smile in remembrance of all those prayers coming together.

Love extravagantly.

Live openly and expansively.

Throw caution to the wind, giving with reckless abandon.

Keep your special gifts dusted off and in use.

May all the best from our God and Christ be yours!

Introduction

From one day to the next, one year to the next, newspaper headlines and CNN broadcasts don't seem to change. Armies invade neighboring countries. Suicide bombers blow up a bus. Assassins topple governments. Earthquakes level major cities. Politicians steal the public blind. Something else causes cancer. Another Hollyweirdo ODs. And some lunatic is loose in public.

Things aren't much better on campus. A nutcase unloads an assault rifle at innocents in the parking lot. Fights break out almost daily. A major drug raid leads to seventeen student arrests. The homecoming queen gets pregnant. The football coach keels over with a heart attack. Your car is busted into again. Your significant other begins dating someone else. And you flunk a chem midterm.

On the home front, your parents call a family meeting to announce their pending divorce. Your sister runs screaming to the bathroom. Your brother is his usual slob self. Your aunt with her armpit-hair-of-a-cat comes to stay on one-day's notice. And you get laid off at work.

If you're anything like me, you sometimes feel overwhelmed by the chaos of life around you. There are days when nothing or nobody makes sense. You're convinced you're the last surviving sane person, and even then you wonder if you're not crazy yourself.

On days when I feel like that, it helps me to tell God and get the burden off my shoulders. That doesn't mean things will change overnight . . . or necessarily at all. It just makes me feel better to know that God understands how fragile I feel.

That God understands and cares about the intimate details of our lives is made clear in the Bible, a sort of Owner's Manual for the human race. It is not, however, a technical manual of schematic diagrams and charts, nor a cold, dead, dated document. It's at once love story, autobiography, biography, self-help text, poetry anthology, compilation of personal letters, songbook, log of genealogy, how-to manual, and collection of prophecy.

It contains stories from men and women who have trusted God completely—providing guidance and inspiration for you—and it details life histories of people who have just as completely disregarded God—giving you fair warning.

Above all, the Bible is God's way of stepping out of the shadows and making

himself known. It tells us exactly what he's like, what he expects of us, why things aren't the way they ought to be, and what he intends to do about it.

It is my hope that *The One Year Alive Devotions for Students* will help you better understand God and the Bible, which is his final word on how to experience a full, rich life. It guides you and helps you maneuver through every difficulty, whether it's your fears about next year, your tears about a broken relationship, or just the itchiness of living in your own skin. God knows and cares about these matters and more.

In James 4:8 the Bible says, "Come close to God, and God will come close to you." *The Message* puts it this way: "Say a quiet *yes* to God and he'll be there in no time." So take God up on the promise by spending time together on those days you feel like a human hockey puck. It's a great relief to sense God's presence.

As you read this book in the coming days and weeks, you'll discover that God wants to be the still point of your turning, twisting, ever-changing world. You've got his Word on it.

Rick Christian Colorado Springs



The Personal Tag

Rejoice because your names are registered in heaven. LUKE 10:20

I have a strange habit. Whenever I travel, the first thing I do upon checking into a hotel or stopping for gas is to open the local phone book. I want to know whether anyone else has my name. So far, no one has. But then, I have an unusual name: S. Rickly Christian.

That name, assigned by my parents, was written on a blue plastic bracelet and attached to my arm after birth. These bracelets, given to all babies, were the hospital's way of ensuring that newborns wouldn't accidentally get switched.

Later, that name was the first word I learned to scribble with crayons. It became the name my friends used when they shouted for me down a crowded hall; the name my coach bellowed when I didn't swim fast enough; the name my girlfriend whispered in my ear, causing goose bumps on my neck.

More than any other label, my name symbolizes who I am: my personality, my dreams, my failures, my successes. And it's so personal that my ears pop when I hear my name mentioned in conversation.

To know that my name, according to Luke, is a matter of celestial conversation causes my *mind* to explode! Are you sure, Luke? My *name* recorded in God's Book of Life? I suppose God could keep roll more efficiently by using my social security number or bank account number. Numbers are easier to program, less personal. But God evidently prefers to use names.

That preference, I think, reflects the kind of relationship he wants to build with us. It's his way of assuring us that we matter; we're not just some insignificant blip or code in the far corner of the universe.

Perhaps that is why the Bible is so full of long genealogies—God didn't want to miss a single name!

God's use of my name also signals his concern for the things my name represents: everything from my biggest hurts to my highest hopes. My name, even in my e-mail address, reminds my friends of such things as the day we shared together at the beach, the time we cried when we learned of another friend's cancer, the times we belly laughed at a good joke.

My name, I believe, triggers the same kinds of memories in God's mind: the times we talked together in prayer, the times he comforted me after my parents' deaths, the time I was dazzled by the splash of color he gave a cutthroat trout.

Looking back, I now know these were special times—times of getting to know each other on a first-name basis.

See also 1 Chronicles 1-9; Matthew 1:1-17.

"They Said . . . "

A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it! It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell. James 3:5-6, The Message

Years ago, officials at McDonald's headquarters in Oak Brook, Illinois, became very sensitive about the topic of *earthworms*.

If you had mentioned the subject in the office, chances were good you'd have been tackled by a wart-faced fry cook and gagged with a half-dozen sesame-seed buns. The reason: Ronald McDonald and his Golden Arches cohorts were fighting a rumor that they used the creepy crawlers as protein substitute in their burgers.

The rumor spread across America like . . . well, like earthworms after a spring rain. Sales slumped, and the king of the burger was forced to launch a lavish campaign to regain its reputation.

Rumors usually don't reach such proportions. Often they just circulate among a close circle of friends in places like campus halls and cafeterias. And generally the rumors damage lives and individual reputations, not those of corporations.

Such was the case when the new girl transferred from Florida to a new college. Other coeds on campus felt threatened. They didn't have her cover-girl looks or *Cosmopolitan* wardrobe. So they protected themselves by talking behind her back.

"You're kidding! I never knew *that*," said one girl. And before long, tongues all over were wagging. To make the story *really* juicy, they'd pad the tale a little here, stretch a bit there. Soon, this poor girl's life was on the rocks—shipwrecked. The anguish she must have felt and the tears she must have shed were probably similar to those in a case I read about in which a woman's suicide note simply read, "They said . . ."

She didn't complete the sentence. Something "they said" killed her.

See also Psalm 140:1-3; Romans 1:29-32; 1 Peter 3:8-12.

The Exchange

May you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. EPHESIANS 3:18

Imagine this scene: You've just been born and are taking your first breaths outside your mother's womb. The obstetrician and nurse are smiling, but your parents are strangely silent. They confer quietly to themselves, ignoring your cries.

"Doctor," your father says, turning to the physician, "would you mind holding the baby up again so we can better decide?"

"Decide what?" the doctor asks, lifting you into the light.

"We just want to be sure the child's right for us," your father says. "We saw another baby in the nursery that seemed to have, well, a little more promise. This one here is too ruddy, and the eyes are the wrong color. We wanted a child with blue eyes and, um, a shorter nose."

He confers briefly with your mother and then motions the obstetrician closer.

"Doctor, we've talked it over now, and we'd like to work out an exchange. I'm sure we could eventually learn to love this little one, but we really had our hearts set on a cute, blond baby."

This scenario is understandably absurd. When you were born, your parents accepted you into their family without qualifications. Their love was not based on your looks or performance. Not even your drooling mattered. They loved you simply because you were their child. Granted, their love at times was not perfect. There were times they withheld their affection—such as the time you wrecked the family car or the night you missed your curfew by three hours. So while a parent's love is great, it does have limits.

But God's love has no bounds. You're loved because you're his child, and nothing you ever do will make him love you any more or less. His love is unconditional. As the apostle Paul wrote, "Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, 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 8:38-39).

When you realize you're loved that much, you begin to feel like you're worth loving . . . and begin loving others in the same way because you understand that God loves even those you deem unlovable as much as he loves you.

See also Romans 8:31-39; 1 John 4:19-21.

Carbon Copying

Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

I always thought of myself as a lot like Frank. Or maybe I just tried to be like him. When he went out for the swim team, I went out for the swim team. When he dropped swimming for the tennis team, I was right behind him.

We were both journalism junkies and wrote for the school paper. We both got involved in student-body politics. We liked the same kind of music, disliked the same coaches for the same reasons, wore the same kind of jeans, went to the same parties, surfed at the same beach, and even dated some of the same girls.

But things began to change when I became a Christian. I decided to let God take control of my life, and I thought Frank eventually would too. But that never happened. The "big" questions about life that drew me closer to God—Why do I exist? What happens after death? Were Jesus' claims valid? What purpose is there in life?—didn't seem to faze Frank.

When I'd try to talk to him about these things, he'd brush me off. "You're getting all philosophical, and it's just not where I'm at," he'd say. End of conversation.

Slowly, I began to notice we were going in different directions. Parties that once seemed fun began feeling like an empty waste of time. Getting drunk seemed pointless. Jokes I once thought were funny seemed crude and prejudiced—the laugh was always at someone else's expense.

God began to instill in me value for other people. They took on new importance because of *who* they were (unique creations of God) rather than for *what* they were (hot, smart, funny). Members of the opposite sex became more than just bodies. My parents became more than just authorities. In them I discovered people with many of the same needs I had—but I'd never noticed before.

When I think of Frank, I feel how a pardoned criminal probably feels toward buddies left behind in prison. You'd love for them to join you on the outside, yet the bars are all they know. And they only laugh when you tell them that the warrant for release—the pardon—has already been signed.

Becoming a Christian is an acceptance of that fact. It's not an effort, a striving, a ceaseless seeking. It's a letting go. And slowly you begin to notice that Christ is working on you from the inside out to give you new purpose, new values . . . and a new pattern for life.

See also Ephesians 4:17-24; 6:10-18.

The Visibility Factor

You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. MATTHEW 5:14-16, The Message

Melinda was a typical case of what John Stott calls a "rabbit hole Christian." She'd bounce out her front door in the morning without a grunt of greeting, scurry to campus, and then race from the parking lot looking for her usual clique of Christian friends. Their favorite hangout before class: a bank of benches outside the library.

Later, she'd proceed with her holy huddle to journalism, where they'd sit together in the back corner by the window. Often they'd text back and forth and flash quiet smiles about some hidden joke. When lunchtime arrived, Melinda and her friends would make a mad dash to the corner burrito shop and lay their books and sweaters across a large table to reserve it for other Christians. They'd talk about God and how messed up their families were and then retreat outside together for some informal Bible reading on the patio.

After class, she'd buzz home, inhale her dinner, and then drive across town to pick up fellow Christians, sometimes for a Bible study at church, where they'd pray for God's help in witnessing to nonbelievers on campus. After the final prayers, she'd scurry back home, wave to others in passing, and then disappear into her room where she'd mumble a few "bless'ems" before falling asleep. And upon waking in the morning, she would begin her harried, holy pace all over again.

As Christians, we can't be lights of the world if our only contacts with unbelievers are those mad blitzes to and from Christian gatherings. We can't withdraw—we must penetrate darkness with the light of God's love. And it's hard to generate much brightness from rabbit holes.

See also Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 1:17; John 8:12.

Holy Hype

If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. JAMES 1:26

I earned decent grades in most classes but was less than a scholar with foreign languages. I took three years of Spanish, yet scored 17 out of 150 points on a college proficiency test. And if I tried to converse with a native in Tijuana today, I probably couldn't get much further than ¿Cómo está?

I switched to French in college. The result? I can count to ten without looking in a dictionary. In other languages, I can ...let's see ... say "I love you" in Tagalog and Japanese; I can remember a few words in Italian like *spaghetti*, *ravioli*, and *lasagna*; and I can hold my own in Australia, Ireland, and Kentucky, though the foreign accents trouble me.

With such a background, I sympathize with people who understandably scratch their heads when Christians convene their holy huddles and start rambling about things like redemption, agape love, the Trinity, the Rapture, and "being saved by the blood."

One writer has said the world is bombarded with a mishmash of religious gobbledygook from people like "Theodore Theologian"—with his pointy-headed talk about glorification, justification, and sanctification—and his counterpart, "Rev. Pat Popcorn"—with his holy hype: "Praise Gawd!" "Jump for joy!" "I see those hands!" "Pass the plate!" "Amen!"

Actions speak louder than words, it is said. Perhaps that is why the apostle Peter, in writing to Christian women married to unbelievers, urged the wives to let their godliness be demonstrated by their lives, not their words: "Your godly lives will speak to them [the husbands] without any words. They will be won over by observing your pure and reverent lives" (1 Peter 3:1-2).

The apostle James was adamant that Christians control their tongues—that they be "slow to speak" and instead show their faith by good life and deeds (James 1:19).

You see, it's much easier to *sound* spiritual than it is to *be* spiritual. That's the problem Christ found with the Pharisees, religious leaders who talked godly but lived godlessly.

With that in mind, try an experiment: See what happens when you stop just *telling* people you're a Christian and start *showing* them. It can be a radical way of living.

See also James 3:13; 1 John 3:18.



POINTS TO PONDER: Christianity

You are the light of the world. MATTHEW 5:14

There is one single fact which we may oppose to all the wit and argument of infidelity, namely, that no man ever repented of being a Christian on his death bed. > Hannah More

Christian: one who believes that the New Testament is a divinely inspired book admirably suited to the spiritual needs of his neighbors. > Ambrose Bierce

Being a Christian is more than just an instantaneous conversion—it is a daily process whereby you grow to be more and more like Christ. Jesus Christ is the man God wants every man to be like. > Billy Graham

Take the case of a sour old maid, who is a Christian, but cantankerous. On the other hand, take some pleasant and popular fellow, but who has never been to Church. Who knows how much more cantankerous the old maid might be if she were not a Christian, and how much more likable the nice fellow might be if he were a Christian? You can't judge Christianity simply by comparing the product in these two people; you would need to know what kind of raw material Christ was working on in both cases. > C. S. Lewis

If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? > David Otis Fuller

A real Christian is an odd number. He feels supreme love for One whom he has never seen; talks familiarly every day to Someone he cannot see; expects to go to heaven on the virtue of Another; empties himself in order to be filled; admits he is wrong so he cannot be declared right; goes down in order to get up; is strongest when he is weakest; richest when he is poorest and happiest when he feels the worst. He dies so he can live; forsakes in order to have; gives away so he can keep; sees the invisible; hears the inaudible; and knows that which passes knowledge. > A. W. Tozer

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. > Jim Elliot

It is so hard to believe because it is so hard to obey. > Søren Kierkegaard

The Christian faith has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried. > G. K. Chesterton

Christianity is the land of beginning again. > W. A. Criswell

See also Matthew 5:13; Colossians 3:1-17.

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About the Author

RICK CHRISTIAN has had a lifelong passion for words and great writing. He is the founder and president of Alive Communications, the premier literary agency for inspirational books, with more than a dozen *New York Times* #1 best sellers to his credit. A graduate of Stanford University, he served as associate editor of *Campus Life* magazine and executive editor of *The Saturday Evening Post*, then transitioned to book publishing as the founding editorial director of Focus on the Family books. Along the way, he wrote several books himself, including *The Woodland Hills Tragedy*, *A Gift of Life*, and *Silent Night*. Rick and his wife, Debbie, have a blended family of seven children and live in Black Forest, near Colorado Springs.