

SEELAH



Back2Back wants to thank Calvary Industries for their generosity in sponsoring this year's Bible Study! We hope you enjoy this devotional and pray it is something you return to in the days to come following your trip. Together, with staff, sponsors, and advocates around the world, we won't stop, until every child is known & loved.

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HOW TO BE INVOLVED



We are so glad you're here! During and after your time serving with us, there are many ways to remain connected to Back2Back's mission and advocating on behalf of vulnerable populations.

- Connect with the mission of Back2Back Ministries
- Connect with your team this week
- Connect with the children you will meet
- Connect with Jesus

While Back2Back is a Christian organization, and faith is at the core of what we do, we understand this may not resonate with everyone serving this week.

Wherever you are on your faith journey, if you are on one at all, know we are so happy and grateful to serve alongside you this week.

HOW TO ENGAGE THIS WEEK



There is an easy way to engage in the week so you can maximize your connections while here. This week you will probably find yourself in new and even challenging situations. In order to get the most out of your time, we want to encourage you to engage with each moment and day in a challenging but healthy way. It's as simple as one do and one don't.

DO challenge yourself to step outside of your comfort zone. Push yourself in new ways as much and as often as you can. That may look like praying out loud, trying new food, playing with a child, learning some new language, or being vulnerable in a circle of people. This is how you will learn, grow, and experience the most God has for you this week.

DON'T push yourself to a point of danger. For example, if you have a serious fear of heights and someone asks you to climb a 30 ft. ladder, putting yourself in that emotional and physical danger won't help you grow, and won't help us serve vulnerable children.

Be aware of your limits, and if something is crossing a line, communicate with a staff member.

COMMUNICATION & SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES

Back2Back is committed to safeguarding the well-being of every child and family we serve globally. We seek to model healthy adult-child interactions and reduce the risk of harm to vulnerable people.

The principles of supervision, visibility, and accountability guide our preventative safeguarding strategies.

Social media, with its constantly-evolving platforms, presents opportunities but also great risks.

Those who desire to bring harm to others can gain access to children through social media connections, increasing a child's vulnerability to exploitation or harm online.

An identifiable image of a child increases exposure and can reveal their location to those seeking to bring harm.

Back2Back cares deeply about the children and families in our programs. All decisions must be made with their well-being at the center.

For this reason, **mission guests may not have direct, unmonitored communication with any child or young adult in any Back2Back program by telephone, the internet, or any social media platform.**

When communicating about Back2Back programs online in your personal social media platforms, that communication should:

- Safeguard the child's right to dignity, confidentiality, and privacy
- Not disclose specific geographic locations or personal identifying information (such as last name, birth date, school name, where the child lives, children's home name, any detail of personal trauma history)
- Not contain photos or videos of children or families served
- Follow all applicable government regulations and restrictions

For more info refer to the Safeguarding Policy you signed with your trip forms or see a staff member.

PHOTOGRAPHY GUIDELINES

It is prohibited for any mission trip guest to post any video or photo of a minor or any individual in Back2Back programs to any social media site.

You may upload photos of children to shared folders (ex. Dropbox, Google Drive, Apple Photos, Shutterfly, etc.) that are not accessible to the public. It is permitted to like and share social media content from Back2Back Ministries on your personal social media page.

- Each Back2Back site, in accordance with local law, will inform guests if they are permitted by the local government to take photos of children for personal use.
- Photos should be taken out in the open, in public spaces, and never in private.
- Make sure to request a child's permission before taking their photo.
- Best practice recommends only taking photos of groups rather than individual children.



WAYS YOU CAN SHARE:

A FAVORITE VIEW



WORK PROJECTS



YOUR MISSION TEAM



Follow us on social media. Please like, share, or repost any social media content from Back2Back Ministries or staff on your personal social media pages.



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TRAUMA INFORMED?



At Back2Back, we learn constantly and are relentless in our pursuit of what is best for vulnerable children and families. This relentless pursuit has taken us on a journey to become trauma-informed. This means we seek to understand the impact of trauma and learn ways to provide care both healing and helpful.

While you serve with us this week, we invite you to learn alongside us as we pursue what's best for children and families. And don't stop when you get home!

Learn about trauma and its impact. Trauma is any experience that overwhelms a person's capacity to cope. Extreme levels of fear change the brain, body, and belief system. We want to understand trauma's impact, recognize fear-based reactions, and respond in intentional ways

Increase felt safety: Long lasting feelings of fear are a common impact of trauma. It's hard for the brain and body to know and believe it is safe. We respond by acting in ways that help people feel safe.

- **Get down** on one knee or bend down when speaking to children. This helps a child know you aren't a threat.
- **Give warnings** before changing activities or moving locations. Say something like "10 more minutes, then it's time to eat lunch!" Then give warnings when it's 5 more minutes and 2 more minutes. This avoids unexpected quick changes.
- **Ask permission** before touching a child. Even if you don't speak the same language, an extended hand for a handshake or hand in the air for a high five with a kind face, invites the child to respond in ways that feel safe to them.
- **Play!** Challenge yourself to connect with kids through play because play disarms fear.

Want to keep learning about trauma? Back2Back's sister organization, Trauma Free World, offers live and on-demand training focused on providing healing, restorative care to orphaned and vulnerable children. Scan here to learn more!



SPANISH PHRASES



Hi _____ Hola

How are you _____ ¿Cómo estás?

What's up _____ ¿Qué onda?

My name is... _____ Me llamo ...

What's your name _____ ¿Cómo te llamas?

I am ___ years old _____ Tengo ___ años.

How old are you _____ ¿Cuántos años tienes?

What's your favorite (animal, sport, color, subject, food) _____ ¿Cuál es tu (animal, deporte, color, materia, comida) favorito?

Do you want to play _____ ¿Quieres jugar?

Do you want to sit with me _____ ¿Quieres sentarte conmigo?

Do you want to be a team? _____ ¿Quieres ser equipo?

High five! _____ ¡Chócala!

Stick together _____ Manternos juntos

No hurts _____ Sin lastimar

Have fun _____ Divertirnos

INTRODUCTION

BETH GUCKENBERGER
BACK2BACK CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament is Psalms. The assumption is people knew the reference because it was their hymnal; there are songs sung for every situation and state of the heart.

It is a collection of everything the community of faith needs.

Do you have a breakup song? A workout song? A love song? A go-to bed song?

This is the idea of Psalms - there is something for all our feelings. Good days, bad days, 'thank you Jesus' moments, where-are-you- God? moments.

Together, we will tackle 10 of them this week, but our hope is it encourages you to return to this book over and over again. It's a book that speaks to you, and also, speaks for you.

When you don't know what to say to God, the Psalmists can help.

In this book, we see honest prayers of lament, prayers of pain, confusion, and anger.

They draw attention to what's wrong in the world.

These psalms ask God to do something about it. It's an appropriate response to the hard. We also see prayers of praise, prayers of joy and celebration.

They draw attention to what's good in the world. They retell good stories and thank God.

We need to be fluent in both kinds of prayer.

Christians historically aren't great at this.

When someone tells us what's going on and it's hard, we say cliché comments because other people's pain makes us uncomfortable. We ask ourselves: How can I fix this? When most situations don't need fixed, they need healed. Or grieved. There are more psalms of lament than any other kind. Why?

Because life is complicated and messy.

When you read a psalm that has a cry of distress- God, where are you? It can sound angry/bitter/ "just show up already."

These psalms demonstrate however, that God can handle our language. We don't need to be polite.

The book of Psalms is not a textbook to be memorized. We aren't reading a theology book, but a worshippers' response to divine action (or perceived inaction.) There is a lot of emotion.

Psalms are real emotions of real people, trying to live their real faith in a real, broken world. We should recognize them.

In this devotional, you'll hear staff sharing their hearts, their stories, and their insights.

We'll dive into Psalms together and I hope it means more transparent conversations between you and who you've traveled with and you and God

God's family should have the kind of community where we sit with one another, we feel safe and are known.

And once we know how to do that with one another, we can offer that kind of "kingdom of heaven on earth" experience to those who yet know Him.

And just one more thing . . . This year our theme is called *selah*, which is a Hebrew word found often in Psalms.

The meaning of this word has been debated since the second century, some saying it means "pause," while others say "to lift up," and still others say "forever."

However you end up feeling settled in this debate, may it remind you of this book of songs and the Church who loved to sing them.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

PSALM 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

FIELD STORY BY KRISTEN HALLAHAN
BACK2BACK MAZATLÁN STAFF

I sat across from Naytiely in a corner coffee shop. It had been months since we'd last seen each other, and I was anxious to hear about more than just her day; I wanted to truly know how she was doing. We met years ago when she was in a children's home, connecting over conversation. She's now in her early 20s, living independently, and working while attending university. She is a true reflection of a future brightening, even when circumstances suggest otherwise.

"What has felt difficult recently?" I asked.

Her face changed, tears spilling over. "A lot," she answered quietly.

She listed the difficulties in a rush as if she'd been waiting to share - uncertainty about life post-university, big life transitions, and arduous circumstances never changing. I realized the difficulties she felt were attached to a fear of her future. I recognized it, as it played a significant role in my own life.

"I understand," I responded. I understood the internal emotions and changes that come with transitions; I was also familiar with allowing God to guide me. After a minute or so of silence, she ran through the "what ifs" of each impending decision, wondering if she was capable of making any choices at all.

"The Lord's already there." It was the only response I felt confident offering. She looked confused as she asked, "Where?"

"In all of it. In your next decision, your next steps, and wherever else you find yourself after this."

A small smile bloomed across her face. I reminded her that when it came to moving forward, nothing was set in stone, the Lord was always near, and faithful to direct her steps.

She has since graduated from university and is facing many of the decisions she shared with me that day. We are trusting the Lord to hold each result of those decisions in His hands, knowing His love and goodness will continue in her story all the days of her life.

What I've come to learn about the future is it will always be unknown. It's why we need a good Shepherd. If we desire to make it to the green pastures and still waters of our journeys, we must learn to trust Him, because He is already there, where we're headed.

PSALM 23 REFLECTION

Psalm 23:3 says *He restores my soul*. What does restoration look like? Feel like?

Kristen's words for Naytiely were wise, even in their simplicity. The Lord's already there. How often are we so caught up in what needs to materialize that we forget He's already gone ahead and secured our space there? Psalm 23:5 says *You prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows*. While the enemy can sometimes mean a physical being, He can use the fear we're allowing to steer; David, the author of Psalm 23, takes time to intentionally remind us - God is there - in the doubt and fear, at that spot you're not sure you belong in - He's already there.

God is trustworthy.

It can be easy to forget or dismiss when we're wading through the day-to-day that feels heavy and confusing. It's why words like we find in Psalm 23 are so important to return to. It's a reminder that we are loved by the God who remains with us (v. 4), *who restores us* (v. 3), and *who leads us* (v. 2). He has chosen us distinctly for the paths we currently walk. He knows exactly what Naytiely must decide, and He also knows exactly where she will rest - because He is already there.

This week, you will have opportunities to lead with love. That may look like a smile to the child too shy to play with new people; it could be a game of UNO in the shade, or sitting next to a teen during a study break. No matter what ways God opens doors for connection, remember what Kristen told Naytiely, and that those words are as true for you, and the children to whom you'll connect this week, as much as they are for her.

God is already there.

1. How does it feel to consider that God is already in spaces we have not yet occupied? Does that bring you peace when you're making decisions? Why or why not?

2. How does God restore you? What people, places, moments, etc does He work through to bring restoration to your mind, heart, and body?

THE LORD IS MY LIGHT AND MY SALVATION

PSALM 27

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock.

And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me!

You have said, "Seek my face." My heart says to you, "Your face, Lord, do I seek." Hide not your face from me.

Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help.

Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!

For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in.

Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

Give me not up to the will of my adversaries; for false witnesses have risen against me, and they breathe out violence.

I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

FIELD STORY BY CHRIS COX

BACK2BACK CINCINNATI DIRECTOR

Psalm 27 illustrates the tension between the safety of the house of the Lord and the fear of enemies closing in on every side. In cities like Cincinnati, the "enemies" surrounding children go by names like scarcity, disparity, and division. As these enemies close in, it is the home that feels most under attack. When the Psalmist writes we get to dwell in the house of the Lord and are invited to gaze upon His beauty, I realize God's beauty is rarely a focal point. We often talk about the beauty of creation (especially when we are at a Back2Back site - captivated by mountains, oceans, beaches, rivers, and people). At times, I forget creation is a reflection of God's creativity. If we are made in His image, then the beauty of humanity is a reflection of God's beauty. To gaze upon the beauty of God is to gaze upon that which makes us beautiful to Him. It's the face of grace in a moment of despair; it's the eyes of empathy when pain is overwhelming; it's the smile of joy when hope fills the room; it's a cycle broken, a battle tackled, and a new path forged.

The Christmas season is always busy for Back2Back Cincinnati. There are plenty of opportunities for families to access resources unique to the season; December is a month of generosity. As staff, we try to guide children, youth, and families toward resources that empower them to sustainability. This means a lot of event planning, follow-up, and conversations around unmet needs. I was deep into phone calls one day, connecting with families for a particular Christmas shopping event, when I realized a young man we'd always included in the past wasn't on the event list this year. I knew it couldn't be a coincidence, because the moment I realized his name wasn't listed, my phone lit up with a text message from him.

Hey, I was just at lunch with my friend and we were laughing about how he walked out of that Christmas experience with a tree and a flat-screen TV last year.

It was true; in a wild turn of events, an 18-year-old left an event with a TV and a tree. His mama was so startled by the gifts that, as she held open the door to let them in, her cats ran out into the neighborhood! Staff spent the next 20 minutes rounding them up, and it was a fun memory. I waited for him to mention not being included in the event this year, but what came next humbled me.

Yeah, we were talking about how both of us have jobs this year and won't need that resource.

He shared about passing all his classes at community college, a job he was sustaining, and the ways he helps provide for his family. He ended the call by asking to volunteer if we still hosted a Christmas party because he missed his Back2Back crew.

PSALM 27 REFLECTION

In a world busy with work, responsibilities, and deadlines, it can feel trivial to prioritize stopping to gaze on the beauty of anything, let alone God. If we never stop to gaze upon God and His beauty, though, we miss important moments.

Chris carries the heavy load of forging connections on behalf of vulnerable families, seeking resources that help break trauma.

We are grateful for moments like he shared above - for young men who know they can reach out to share a milestone, or a special moment.

When we stop and look up from what is directly in front of us, God reminds us of what's important. The "beauty to gaze upon" referenced in chapter 27 is found in mountain ranges, sunsets, fresh snow, a hug, or in Chris' case, a meaningful conversation.

This week, you will see an endless amount of beauty. Whether you gaze on the water, the mountains, or a newly built school, trust God had a hand in bringing it to life. You will also see children play freely, mothers returning home from work to a house full of kids, and staff members encouraging families to remain together.

Beauty is abounding. How will you slow down and look up? This week of serving others will likely change you in ways still unclear, but we encourage you to be present, and gaze upon His beauty - it is everywhere.

1. When was the last time you truly allowed yourself to gaze upon the beauty of God? What was it? Who was with you? How did it impact how you view God, yourself, and others? If you feel comfortable, share these answers with your small group

2. Why do you think we are encouraged by the psalmist to gaze upon God's beauty? How do you think it benefits us? Our belief in Him?

JOY COMES WITH THE MORNING

PSALM 30

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up, and have not let my foes rejoice over me.

O Lord my god, I cried to you for help and you have healed me.

O Lord, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit.

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved.' By your favor, O Lord, you made my mountain stand strong; you hid your face; I was dismayed.

To you, O Lord, I cry, and to the Lord I plead for mercy; 'What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be merciful to me! O Lord, be my helper!'

You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!

FIELD STORY BY STEPHANI DUFF BACK2BACK STAFF

I was visiting India for the second time, my first as full-time staff with Back2Back. There were two new faces in the crowd of children this time. Their big, brown eyes held a sadness and reservation I'd not seen before. As we toured the campus, I asked about the two new children. "They were rescued by the government from a kidnapping ring, and when no one stepped forward to claim them, they were placed here," they explained.

I felt my chest constrict as I processed this information, *what would that experience be like?* In the evenings, when the campus was quiet, and everyone settled, I heard cries ringing out. They were little boys in a new place, with new people, and they spoke very little English. I imagined their fear but found it difficult. After a week, the trip came to an end and I vowed to pray for their tiny bodies and tender hearts, hopeful they would soon feel at home.

A year later, I lived and worked from their campus for two months. It was a dream in so many ways, and some of the most profound memories I hold are of time with those two boys. In just a year, they went from frightened and withdrawn to vibrant and engaged. They were among the first to greet me when I landed on campus, anxious to hear about my flight and ready to play a game of UNO on their front porch. I marveled at the transformation.

You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness... (v. 11)

This verse rolled around in my mind throughout my stay, as I sat with Amir* in the evenings, teaching him card games. They rang clearly after school as I played round after round of badminton with Rohan*. One afternoon, on a holiday when most children were off campus, Rohan and Amir remained. I was finishing an assignment when I heard "Siiiiiiiister!" from outside where I worked. I ran onto the porch area and looked down; Rohan was riding a bike, a wide grin overtaking his face. "I can ride my bike now, Sister!"

I watched him ride the length of the campus every chance he could and thought back to the little boy I'd met before - quiet, wounded. I've been several times since that stay and each time, Rohan and Amir have grown both literally and figuratively. They are young men now with dreams, who know the power of their voices. They realize their past circumstances do not define their future potential. This is the power of the God who meets us in our grieving, in our hurting and vows to never stop pursuing and to never leave.

He turns our mourning into dancing.

PSALM 30 REFLECTION

When God formed Rohan and Amir in their mother's wombs, He knew the tumultuous circumstances they would each endure. He knew about a campus in rural Hyderabad not yet founded, where both would arrive wounded, wondering where they fit. He knew the staff who would be present to offer holistic care and consistent, safe love that would ultimately lead to their flourishing.

God is not blind to the suffering of His kids, and He never leaves us to face it alone. He calls, equips, and prepares each of us in unique ways to ensure vulnerable populations better understand their value.

You may understand exactly why you were called to this trip, at this time in your life. Or you may have said yes to a trip out of obedience, but don't yet understand why. God plans to use you. It could be a shared smile, a conversation in broken English, or putting together new playground equipment; He will use your gifts to further His kingdom and to introduce healing into a story.

This week, be open to the many ways God may use you as a stepping stone in someone's growth. You may meet children just like Amir and Rohan - new to their surroundings and unsure. You may be reconnecting with a teen you've long known. No matter the case, you have an opportunity to give kindness and gently remind a child or family they matter, regardless of their story.

Today, be open to helping mourning transform into dancing.

1. When was a time in your life you saw mourning turn into dancing? Did others in your life help in that? How did it help you see yourself and God differently?

Lined writing area for reflection 1.

2. Do you have an understanding of what your God-given gifts are? How can you use them to serve others?

Lined writing area for reflection 2.

THE STEADFAST LOVE OF THE LORD

PSALM 33

Shout for joy in the Lord, O you righteous!

Praise befits the upright. Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!

Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.

He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.

He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap; he puts the deeps in storehouses.

Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him! For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man; from where he sits enthroned he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds; The King is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue.

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine.

Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.

For our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

FIELD STORY BY SARAH ELLIS HAITI STATESIDE SITE MANAGER

For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice... (v.4)

Justice and righteousness have been significantly lacking in Haiti for the past several years. Nearly every headline is another innocent person caught in the crossfire, families displaced from their homes and other atrocities and scarcities. The relentless unrest and instability have left Haitians, the displaced, and those with a heart for this Caribbean nation crying out, 'How much longer, O Lord?'

The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples... (v.10)

For Back2Back Haiti, this unrest has meant a season of frustrated plans. The Haiti staff, who are deeply invested in the growth and development of the vulnerable, set goals and make plans. Then they pivot, and pivot again, as circumstances outside their control thwart so many of their efforts.

How can hope be held onto in the face of darkness and frustration? Psalm 33:16-17 speaks to this. Salvation and hope do not come from great resources, great strength, or great plans. These are false hopes that cannot rescue or restore.

Our only hope is in our almighty, unchangeable Creator God. Our plans fail, but His never do.

The Lord's plans stand firm forever; his intentions can never be shaken. (v. 11)

When I think of this kind of hope and trust in the Lord, I think of Nadege Similien, Haiti Strong Families Program Captain. Every day she lives out her calling, faithfully ministering to families. Nadege empowers each parent to see their value and worth, reinforcing that they can care for their family, and equipping them to face difficult circumstances.

She can speak with authenticity, as she has faced her own difficult circumstances, raising her children. She responds with compassion to every struggle and is the first to celebrate their victories. Nadege uses wisdom gained from previous work experience to coach and encourage Strong Families moms in small business endeavors. And her example of faith invites everyone around her into deeper reliance on the Lord.

Our conversations are full of hope, of the assurance God has Haiti under His wings, that He sees the plight of His people and will respond. When I talk to Nadege, I am challenged to trust God more deeply and look for all the signs of His love in the world.

Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. For our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. (v.18-21)

We can hold on to hope because God fills the world with His steadfast love.

May we each grow in our trust in the Lord, to be able to say with Nadege and our Haitian brothers and sisters:

Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord, for our hope is in you alone. (v.22)

PSALM 33 REFLECTION

How exciting is it to understand we were made and loved by God who believes in justice?

We can look at the world today, view the headlines, listen to the travesties both near and far, and be engulfed with heartache. God is, too.

This isn't what He hoped for.

He started this story with His kids, in His presence, experiencing His peace. That's how this story will end. But in between are broken circumstances we have to grow and learn within. While we cannot erase what is happening and we cannot shut off our ears and hearts to suffering, we can be confident knowing not one tear is shed without His knowledge.

Haiti has long experienced turmoil and isn't a stranger to devastation, yet Back2Back staff marvel at how safe the campus has remained through it all; it has become a haven for the families and children there. Amid every trial, loss, and disruption, they trust in God.

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. (v.18-20)

As God helps and shields His children in Haiti, may we open our own eyes to notice when He does the very same for each of us, right where we are.

1. Do you believe God shields and helps you? Why or why not?

2. Can you think of a time in your life when you truly felt God protecting you from something? How did that make you feel? What was your response?

RESTORE OUR FORTUNES, O LORD

PSALM 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'

The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like streams in the Negeb!

Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!

He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

FIELD STORY BY JORDAN MCNULTY COBOS

BACK2BACK MONTERREY STAFF

We don't always get to see the harvest of a sown seed. Jesus has the full picture, we only see a fraction. We must trust, knowing God will allow seeds to take root, and become the eventual harvest.

Leading workshops for biological families is part of my role at a partnering children's home in Monterrey. Helping parents better understand their children and themselves allows healing to take place for entire families.

We particularly focus on parent-child attachment; we want parents to understand they cannot offer what they don't already have, and they cannot teach what they never learned for themselves. They drew pictures in crayon representing their home lives as children, then shared their drawings; one by one, recounting pieces of their history. A petite woman named Marbella* stood, displaying a darkly colored image with a lone figure in the middle of the darkness.

"From a very young age, I was abandoned, left with a grandmother who had already raised her children and was tired. I never truly felt wanted by anyone."

Marbella later left home but found herself in the same cycle she desperately tried to escape.

"Before today, I believed everything bad I'd experienced was my fault. I see now it wasn't; I understand how I was raised wasn't okay.

God created me to be loved and wanted. I lacked positive parenting skills because it wasn't ever modeled for me; I will leave here with the tools necessary to alter the story.

I want to be a good mom; I want my son's life to be drastically different from mine," she shared vulnerably.

As everyone around her wiped tears from their eyes, God opened a door. We were able to remind her what she experienced wasn't His design and that He could redeem every broken piece.

I saw Marbella years later, and she was different. She took steps to change and her son's story was evidence of the broken cycle. He has since graduated from the Hope Education Program, where his mom watched him accept his diploma with pride.

And the story isn't over yet.

PSALM 126 REFLECTION

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them,' The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad... He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. (v 1-3 & 6)

Marbella's wounds were known to God, but they were not His plan for her. We are designed for joy and glory, but live in a broken world, alongside other broken people. Marbella didn't know she could ask for different until she heard about Jesus and His true design for her life.

With this new understanding, she held out her hand, asking for guidance. It is the power of the family of God, sharing their stories, traveling to new countries- like you, and standing alongside the vulnerable in love.

Through one conversation, a shared board game, or sitting next to someone new for a meal, you have the opportunity to communicate simple, yet empowering statements - I see you. I hear you. You are known.

You can display kindness to someone who might have few experiences of it. How might God be asking you to step forward this week to remind someone the story isn't over? You will meet children, teens, and parents who are hurting.

There is a chance they have not experienced many positive interactions with others. How can you step briefly into their story and show them God's love? How will you walk through an open door and help someone vulnerable see the Lord has, and will, do great things for them?

1. Can you think of a time when things felt hopeless and someone reminded you of your worthiness and ability? How can you honor that person this week and offer the same love to someone new?

2. Write down and, if you're comfortable, share with your small group, one action step you can take this week to demonstrate love in action to someone new.

MY HELP AND MY DELIVERER

PSALM 40

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord. Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie!

You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you!

I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told. In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burn offering and sin offering you have not required.

Then I said, 'Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.' I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; behold I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord.

I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.

As for you, O Lord, you will not restrain your mercy from me; your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me! For evils have encompassed me beyond number; my iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head; my heart fails me.

Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me! Let those be put to shame and disappointed altogether who seek to snatch away my life; let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who delight in my hurt!

Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, 'Aha, Aha!' But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, 'Great is the Lord!'

As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God!

FIELD STORY BY DAN UCHEREK BACK2BACK CANCUN STAFF

Roberto shifts his gaze to avoid eye contact as he arrives at the community center.

He didn't want to be there, and he definitely didn't want to interact with anyone.

He sits in the corner, playing with a few small cars, and remains removed from the other kids in his class.

Roberto's home life isn't ideal. His is a family with generational brokenness.

His parents are separated, and his father lacks consistent presence and support.

At seven years old, Roberto has experienced more loss and pain than many do in an entire lifetime. He struggles to see past his current situation, feeling there is little hope and no way out.

Roberto accidentally makes eye contact with one of the teachers at the community center, something keeps drawing his eyes back to her.

There is something different about the teachers at the community center.

They speak words of life. They share about a God who loves Roberto despite all he's been through.

They tell of the wonderful things God has done (v. 5). They believe in the One who can change the cycles that entrap Roberto and his family (v. 13).

And, even when Roberto feels surrounded by his troubles (v. 12), he learns that God is always near and He is mighty to save (v. 13).

Slowly, he opens up.

When the teachers speak to him now, he offers them small smiles as he learns to trust those around him.

I love watching God move in Roberto's life, watching him open up, flourish, and understand he is in a safe and loving environment.

Roberto is being healed one day at a time, and together we are seeing God deliver his tender heart from their troubles (v. 17).

PSALM 40 REFLECTION

As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God!

Psalm 40:17 signals the Lord's attention to His children, even those difficult to approach and pulled back from day-to-day interactions, like Roberto.

So often, we bring to Him only what is on our plate. Roberto carries with him the painful experience that people can't always be counted on. His time at the community center, while slow going, has helped Roberto see what has been, and doesn't have to dictate what will always be.

God used adults who are safe, trustworthy, and patient to soften Roberto's heart and open his eyes to the care around him, and today, he realizes he is safe and seen. He is known and loved.

As Roberto realizes this is true, things begin to change. Sometimes he forgets, and there is faltering. It's the work and the walk of someone who is reaching out to God as his helper and friend. God holds the most divided stories, the fragile love lines, and writes victory over them.

The Lord takes thought for me. (v.17)

David wrote those words many years ago, not realizing how true they would be for a little boy in Cancun, Mexico. And how true they are for us all.

1. Can you think of a time in your life when someone safe allowed you to open up and let guards down? Who was it?

2. When you read verse 17, "The Lord takes thought for me" how does it make you feel? What do you think that means for your life and story?

CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART, O GOD

PSALM 51

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

FIELD STORY BY MICHAEL SICKLES

BACK2BACK CINCINNATI STAFF

Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit. (v.12) This psalm is powerful, shaping the foundation of my life and ministry.

Early on, God helped me see I could take complex concepts and break them into what my brother lovingly refers to as “dollar tree versions” or simpler ideas, relatable and easily digested.

It has benefitted me well as I serve youth and families entangled in the juvenile criminal legal system.

Nearly all conversations and documents are from a professional perspective, riddled with vocabulary unfamiliar to the layperson. Families and youth are unfairly expected to understand these concepts and make life-altering decisions.

Psalm 51 keeps me humble as I see each court appearance and meeting from the perspective of the community member, parent, youth, and grandparent.

Knowing my imperfections, and those before me each day reminds me Jesus came to give me the “dollar tree version” of the law in His great commandment to love one another. He freed me through mercy and grace, not difficult language. He freed me with His love.

The youth and families I walk alongside deserve love and respect and I show them that through listening to their story and needs.

They are entitled to a safe place where they can make permanent decisions with secure emotions.

Jesus wiped away my guilty deeds, creating in me a clean heart; it is my honor to love my neighbor as the Father has loved me.

PSALM 51 REFLECTION

Youth and families entangled in a court system designed to see statistics, instead of stories, walk into every room with inexperience and naivete, putting them at a disadvantage.

They desire to be seen as a human, not a number.

When God looks at each of His children, He sees a history, their complexity, and a future He's already prepared. For youth facing disparity, future goals can seem a luxury. It's why people like Michael are imperative to the work of justice and healing.

God calls each of us to join Him in bringing light to darkness. He gifts us with His heart for justice and places in our paths, families in need. The challenge is before us to see those around us with His eyes and to use the gifts we've been given for the glory of God and the benefit of others.

How can you use this week to love your "neighbor?" What has God blessed you with that can, in turn, bless a child, teen, or family you meet this week? May we spend this week rejoicing and sharing God's very good news with everyone we encounter.

1. Who is someone in your own life who has helped a painful and difficult process smoother for you? If you're comfortable, share with your small group. Consider an action step you can take to thank them for the ways they rejoiced alongside you in a difficult time.

2. What is a gift you feel you have been given that can serve others and point them to better days? How might you use that gift this week?

IN THE DAY OF TROUBLE, I SEEK THE LORD

PSALM 77

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.

When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah

You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. I consider the days of old, the years long ago.

I said, "Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart."

Then my spirit made a diligent search: "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" Selah

Then I said, "I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High." I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old.

I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.

Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples.

You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. Selah

When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled. The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; your arrows flashed on every side.

The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook.

Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen.

You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

FIELD STORY BY ALÉ CASTRO

BACK2BACK MONTERREY STRONG FAMILIES STAFF

The Bible says God meets us in the desert, and last year, I met a seven-year-old boy and his biological family as they walked through their own. Caleb lived separately from his parents and was familiar with challenges, but through it, had come to know God. He knew God loved his family and wanted to see them restored.

Understanding love and pain can coexist, Caleb saw the beauty of God's plans despite his pain.

The Back2Back Strong Families team works alongside biological families and the children separated from them, pursuing holistic healing, and providing trauma-informed classes all in an effort to break negative cycles. When parents realize that what has been broken, can be healed, families are transformed and remain together.

Together, as we worked alongside Caleb's family, we all understood God was okay with our mixed emotions. We can go to Him in any state, and He won't ever be overwhelmed. We learned our prayers can be emotional, full of questions, and He still hears us.

You don't let me sleep. I am too distressed even to pray! I think of the good old days, long since ended, when my nights were filled with joyful songs. I search my soul and ponder the difference now. Has the Lord rejected me forever? Will he never again be kind to me? Is his unfailing love gone forever? Have his promises permanently failed? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he slammed the door on his compassion? (v. 4-9)

We asked God to provide comfort for Caleb's restless heart. Together, we carried weighty emotions, understanding God doesn't change who He is. We trusted God would reunify Caleb's family. Caleb learned to pray for his family and leave the rest to God. "I want to have the great life I have now, but with my family, not despite them."

In a story seemingly too broken, we witnessed miracles. Caleb grew strong, and accomplished milestones, and his family learned how to provide quality care. Together, they drew near to God, who sat in their brokenness with them, rebuilt the ruins of their past, and healed.

Caleb is now reunified with his family of origin, knowing God is with him in whatever he goes. He will never forget what the Lord has done, and he knows that even when God's voice sounds quiet, He is always working; He is exactly who He says He is.

PSALM 77 REFLECTION

How many times in the Bible do we read of men and women crying out to the Lord? For some of us, it's hard to go directly to God with our feelings and needs.

In today's reading, Alé shares a story of a young boy who discovered a God who listens.

Clear and concise in his desires, Caleb did not hesitate to ask God for exactly what he wanted. What can we learn from Caleb's bold prayers?

God is ever-present. He sees you right this moment, and He knows what you want and need, even if you don't have the words.

This week, you will meet children, teens, and families who have crossed proverbial deserts, struggling and tired. Be gentle in your words and interactions.

Pray with them. Laugh with them. Communicate entire messages with your smile.

You may never know how impactful singular moments of kindness can be.

1. What is a desert you've been in previously that God has helped you through? What did you learn about yourself and God through that?

2. What is a way you can see someone in their own desert and reach out to them? How might you communicate they are never alone, even if that's all they feel?

TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LORD IS GOOD

PSALM 34

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.

Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together! I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.

This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! Oh, fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack!

The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

What man is there who desires life and loves many days, that he may see good?

Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry.

The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.

When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.

Affliction will slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be condemned. The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

FIELD STORY BY TAYLOR ORITZ BACK2BACK MAZATLÁN STAFF

Daniella was sitting across from me and my husband, Memo. There was something different in the way she held herself.

There was a new light in her eyes and a fluid demeanor in her movements. We were doing a check-in, asking her about her relationship with God.

Daniella opened up, marveling at God's work in her life and her changing perspective. She told us she's seeing His goodness and care amidst hard life circumstances. It was only a year ago when we sat with her, that she was in a different place.

When we first met her, she often asked, "How could a loving God permit so much hardship in my life?" Daniella's doubt was palpable, holding her back from fully giving herself to God.

Now, one year later, her circumstances were no different, but she was testifying to how she was. "He has been opening my eyes, helping me see how He takes care of me."

Daniella was learning to express herself to the Lord; she was experiencing freedom in Him, and learning to rely on Him.

Living with renewed hope and joy, she now sees her own story through Psalm 34 - *I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.*

Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.

This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them (v. 4-7).

PSALM 34 REFLECTION

What a privilege it is to witness a heart-shifting.

Taylor and Memo share their own stories and learnings, making themselves available, then the real work happens between God, and the child He is calling closer.

When they met Daniella, she was a worn-down young woman, but they stayed. When safe adults stay in hard stories, and they bring the truth of Jesus into those stories, God moves.

He frees us from fears and provides what we need. He cares for us, transforming us amid difficult circumstances. He guards us, surrounds us, and defends us.

He listens, and then answers. God is removing Daniela's shame, and crowning her with a radiant joy.

He will be using you this week to do the practical work of the gospel, demonstrating His care and concern for those you serve.

This sends a powerful message, that while there will always be storms, we never have to walk them alone.

1. Have you ever questioned God's goodness like Daniella? How did you come through to the other side of that questioning? Did God use others to help you in that time?

2. Think of a time you prayed fervently for something that was answered. Was it answered in the way you wanted or expected? How did the outcome make you feel?

THEY HAVE AFFLICTED ME FROM MY YOUTH

PSALM 129

"Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth" - let Israel now say - "Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me.

The plowers plowed upon my back, they made long their furrows."

The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked.

May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward!

Let them be like the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand nor the binder of sheaves his arms, nor do those who pass by say, "The blessing of the Lord be upon you! We bless you in the name of the Lord!"

FIELD STORY BY SARA JENSEN
BACK2BACK MONTERREY STAFF

When we hear about children who go through the system, we may not understand the full picture of what that means. Andres' adolescence unfolded against the backdrop of multiple children's homes and foster care placements.

I met him as a young man entering Back2Back's Transitioning to Independence Program. He was a 22-year-old student bearing the weight of a challenging past, now navigating preparations for an independent life. As he shared pieces of his story, I saw a young man still healing and struggling to believe his life would turn out any differently than the many male influences before him.

As Andres' mentor in the program, my objective was to help shift his belief system from a survival-oriented perspective to one grounded in faith, hope, community, and aspiration. Despite his remarkable resilience, it was evident this transformation would take time, and it would only work if he was willing to cooperate.

Over several months, we worked together on developing important life skills, such as budgeting, using public transportation, and time management. We discussed his future goals and the steps to get there. He was engaged and present in every conversation, but when faith came up, his hesitancy was palpable. Andres admitted his struggle to embrace faith and his disinterest in exploring anything related to God. I assured him faith was a personal journey, and we continued to work together. I shared my testimony when it felt right, and I prayed the seeds of each discussion took root, even if I saw nothing on the surface.

Some time later, Andres fell leaving for work and was hospitalized with a broken shoulder. His stay was complicated and arduous, but he found comfort and peace in worship music. He texted me various worship songs, asking if I'd heard them and, despite the pain, found profound contentment, subtly stepping into faith.

I drove him home following his surgery, and he asked to play his new favorite worship song while we drove. The car filled with newfound hope, the melody of the music a soundtrack to his resilience. It was a testimony, a small yet distinct victory, echoing the words of the psalmist who declared, "The Lord is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked." Andres' life aligns with the themes of affliction, resilience, and the emergence of faith, drawing parallels to Psalm 129.

I know God is still writing his story, and His promises are true for all of us. While he still has more steps to take to give his life to Jesus, we celebrate the miracle he is willing to move towards faith, instead of away from it.

PSALM 129 REFLECTION

It can be difficult to cling to faith and belief when trials weigh you down. For children and teens like Andres, a lifetime of hurt and being shuffled from home to home can mean more moments of darkness than light; it would be difficult to believe in God when all you've known is pain.

Sara shares about Andres' reluctance to talk about faith and sharing her own stories with him, hoping seeds would take root. And then they did.

They didn't take root because his life suddenly became easy and his wounds were all healed; they took root after another difficult circumstance took place.

Isn't that just the way God works sometimes?

Andres could have laid in his hospital bed and spiraled further away from faith and any desire to know God, but God used worship to connect. Sara was a safe person to share with because she had faithfully shared her trials with Andres. Together, they took first steps toward a life of faith for him.

This week, you will meet children, teens, and adults who may know and love Jesus loudly. You will meet some who don't know Him but are listening whenever He's brought up. And you will meet others who may be in the position Andres is currently in - not completely sure of God, but seeing small glimpses of His goodness, even in the mundane.

You have a unique opportunity to help previously planted seeds take root. You can remind someone you meet this week we are children of the God who reaches for us in our darkest moments, and He doesn't stop, even when we want to.

1. Has there been a time in your life that felt especially dark or difficult, but you still felt the presence and guidance of God? What did that feel like?

2. Who is someone who filled a role in your life the way Sara did for Andres? What is one practical step you can take to thank them for how they helped you see life differently?

SEARCH ME, O GOD, AND KNOW MY HEART

PSALM 139

O Lord, O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. Where shall I go from your Spirit Or where shall I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you. Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain.

Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies.

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

FIELD STORY BY SAMMY SUMMERLIN
BACK2BACK U.S. STAFF

One year, I threw 37 birthday parties. I decorated 37 spaces, cut 37 cakes, and sang the birthday song 37 times. And somehow, it never got old. I never grew tired of icing stuck under my nails after passing out pieces of cake on tiny plates, or the tedious job of peeling tape off the wall after hanging a birthday banner. I knew every plastic table cloth option the party aisle had to offer, and was on a first name basis with the lady at the local cake shop.

As the child sponsorship coordinator for a children's home in Monterrey, Mexico, part of my job was to make sure each child was celebrated on their special day. I can honestly say, it was my favorite part of the job. Every time I walked through the children's home, I was inevitably met by at least one child asking "How many more days until my birthday?"

In a children's home with lots of other kids, it's easy to fade into one big group. They share space, meals, toys, and their caregiver's attention. Their birthday, however, is all about the one. It's a day to declare loud and clear, You are uniquely you!

You were knit together specifically and intentionally! It's a day where we get to say, Your presence here matters so much, we celebrate the very day you came into the world. You are seen. They are seen in the Hot-Wheels cars we gently place on Cesario's marble swirl cake, because he loves all things that go fast and could never choose between chocolate and vanilla. They are seen in the Frozen tablecloth, plates, cups, and balloons covering the table for Ashley's party, because we know she has sung "Let it Go" in front of the television 15 times just this week.

They are seen through the pictures of Jorge's favorite soccer players on the walls and the birthday banner in his favorite team's colors, because we know his loyalty runs deep and he roots for the Tigers to win, even in a losing season. We plan birthday details with care and intentionality as tangible ways of conveying the message, You are known, you are seen, and you are worth celebrating.

It's a public reminder of the truth the psalmist expressed in Psalm 139:
13 *For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*
14 *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.* (v. 14-15)

As we hang banners, light candles, and sing songs to celebrate what God has created, we also simultaneously give praise to the Creator. A birthday celebration is a moment where all who are present join together to say, This work is wonderful, we know that full well.

PSALM 139 REFLECTION

Birthdays are a clear, tangible way we can communicate to anyone in our lives they are seen and loved.

We shower those we love with affection, gratitude, and gifts on other holidays, but a birthday celebration is specially tailored for the one we are honoring. Sammy mentioned different ways she honored children she loves on their birthdays.

From Frozen tablescapes to sports team themes, every child feels seen and loved, because their parties were designed just for them. What a special gift this is to a child who may not have grown up with birthday celebrations.

Can you remember a time someone celebrated you in a way that said, I see you, I love you, this is for you? How did it make you feel? What about the celebration allows you to remember it now? To feel understood and fully known is a priceless gift, for anyone, at any age.

How can you, like Sammy, communicate to someone else they are seen, known, and loved?

Maybe it's a special birthday card with their favorite cartoon character on the front; it could be art supplies for the budding artist you know; perhaps it's just an intentionally written letter at Christmas time to let them know you're thinking of them.

No matter how you show someone they are seen and loved, it's a gift to both them and future generations. Who will you help see today?

1. Who is someone in your life that has intentionally made you feel known and loved? What did they do? How do you think this impacts you to see others?

2. When you read verse 17, "The Lord takes thought for me" how does it make you feel? What do you think that means for your life and story?

PUT NOT YOUR TRUST IN PRINCES

PSALM 146

I will praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.

Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation.

When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish.

Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations.

Praise the Lord!

FIELD STORY BY AZUBIKE KALU

BACK2BACK NIGERIA SITE DIRECTOR

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, o my soul! I will sing praises to my God as long as I live.
(v. 1-2)

These verses are a song in the air, coming from the hearts of many; one of testimony, of God's goodness, provision, and faithfulness. He is writing a story to transform lives and shape generations to come. And He is inviting each of us into it.

The Nigeria staff team gathered for a video call to discuss the possibility of a trauma-informed school in a rural Kisayhip community. We would need miraculous provision and faithful donors to accomplish this long-held dream. In the middle of the meeting, as we were discussing the challenges and opportunities, God hit pause with a phone call. Normally, Todd Guckenberger, Back2Back's Executive Director, wouldn't answer a call in the middle of the meeting, but he stepped away to take it. When he returned, his eyes were smiling, and he shared, "That was a donor willing to give significantly toward starting the school."

The rest of the story is the testimony of Great Oaks Academy.

God heard the dreams of many, was behind the planning, and now was seeing through the execution of opening and operating a new school. *Blessed is He whose help is the God of Jacob . . .* (v. 5)

God used obedient believers to illustrate how He steps into a scene and makes things happen in His time. The elementary school was built and operational just eight months after initial funding.

Today, the school has become like a city on a hill - its light cannot be hidden. It's a representation of the spiritual, physical, educational, emotional, and social transformation reshaping so many lives - from children, families, staff, the community, and eventually the entire state. It represents the 'hope for tomorrow' we are all working towards. It's hope for continued healing for children bruised and an expectation that each child within the walls of the school has a bright future. *Do not put your trust in princes . . .* (v. 3)

The next phase of the school will require more funding and workers, and God is already on the move - an entire church community is coming alongside the vision and bringing it to fruition. *The Lord loves the righteous* (v. 8) Before prayers were even finished for what comes next, God was extending His hand, again and again. There is so much more to this story God is writing. And we know with certainty the lives of all who respond and the lives of the children and families receiving education will never be the same. We are, all of us, changed forever by His Spirit being poured out.



PRAY

BACK2BACK.ORG/PRAY

Stay up to date with how you can pray alongside each of Back2Back's sites around the world.



GIVE

BACK2BACK.ORG/DONATE

When you give to the Care Fund, you are fueling the mission of Back2Back through the primary source of provision for meeting the greatest needs for children and families around the world.



GO

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Continue your impact! Visit your favorite site, again or visit somewhere new!



CHILD SPONSORSHIP

When you sponsor a child or family with Back2Back, you are stepping into their unique story, helping to provide physical needs, educational access, and consistent spiritual, emotional, and social care. How might God be calling you into this narrative of healing through relationship?

You may have already met a child or family this week that isn't easily forgotten. Did you share a meal? A game? A conversation? Do you want to continue your impact after you're back home? Are you feeling called to provide healing through your relationship?

If you are interested in sponsoring a child or family you've met this week, please scan this QR code or see a Back2Back staff member to sign up.

Hope doesn't stand still. Will you step into a child or family's story today?





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OUR TEAM

Come change the world. We're on a mission to pursue the vulnerable until every child is known & loved.

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