

WORDS FROM BIGTOP

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A Weekly Devotional from Curt "BigTop" Marek

FIRST DAYS

Light in the Eyes, Shadow at the Door

Lamentations 3:22–23

“It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.” — Lamentations 3:22–23 (KJV)

Today was the first day of school for my boys — one of them twelve, starting middle school, and the other sixteen, starting another year of high school. Same house. Same breakfast table. Same walk to the same door. And two completely different mornings.

My twelve-year-old woke up before his alarm. He was dressed before I could call his name twice. There was a light in his eyes — the kind that shows up when a kid can already see the whole day laid out in front of him like a map he can’t wait to walk. New building. New locker. Maybe a new friend sitting one seat over. He didn’t know exactly what was coming, and that was the best part. He walked out the door like the sidewalk owed him something good.

My sixteen-year-old moved like the morning was already against him. Same house. Same breakfast. Same walk to the same door — but something had gotten to him in the night. A shadow had climbed in and wrapped itself around him before his feet even hit the floor. He wasn’t afraid of the classroom. He’d already decided the classroom couldn’t give him anything worth getting up for. His eyes weren’t empty — they were heavy. Drowning in something he probably couldn’t have named if I’d asked him. Disdain wearing a sixteen-year-old’s face.

Same house. Same sunrise. Same first day. One boy walked into it like it was a gift he hadn’t opened yet. The other walked into it like it was a bill he already knew he couldn’t pay.

And here’s what got me, standing in that driveway watching two boys I love walk toward the exact same door with two completely different hearts: nothing about that morning had changed on God’s end. The mercy was the same for both of them. The sun rose on both of them. The day was new for both of them, whether either boy felt it or not.

One just remembered that. And one had forgotten.

Same Mercy, Two Mornings

Jeremiah wrote Lamentations sitting in the wreckage of everything he loved. Jerusalem was burned. The temple was rubble. And in the middle of that wreckage, he doesn’t say “God’s mercies show up when things are going well.” He says they’re new every morning — meaning the mercy doesn’t wait for you to feel ready for it. It doesn’t wait for you to earn it back from yesterday. It’s just there, reissued, every single sunrise, whether you slept well or not, whether you’re excited or dreading what’s on the other side of the door.

I’ve started building a small habit around that truth without even realizing that’s what I was doing. First thing I do every morning now, before coffee, before anything else — I make my bed. It sounds too small to matter. But the mess of the night can be brought back to order in about ninety seconds, and it reminds me every single morning that order is possible. I get to rest that bed simply by making it — one small, unglamorous act of order before the day has a chance to talk me out of it. That’s the same mercy Jeremiah is describing. It doesn’t announce itself. It just shows up, new, and waits to see if you’ll reach for it.

“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much.” — Luke 16:10

“Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin.” — Zechariah 4:10

That’s the part we forget. We treat “new day” like a nice sentiment on a coffee mug. Jeremiah is saying something closer to a legal fact: today is not a continuation of yesterday’s failures. It is a fresh issue of God’s compassion, timestamped this morning, addressed to you specifically. One of my boys walked into that fact without even knowing its name. The other one walked past it like it wasn’t there. And most mornings, so do I, until I make the bed and remember.

The Weight I Didn’t Know I Was Carrying

Here’s something else I wasn’t planning on writing about, but it belongs right here next to that boy dragging his feet toward the door. This past year, I’ve lost over a hundred pounds. And the thing that gets me isn’t the number — it’s that I didn’t even realize the weight I’d placed on myself until I started setting it down.

I was busy. Busy trying to keep a family together. Busy working a job that felt like purpose, that felt important enough to justify skipping the gym, skipping sleep, skipping meals that actually fed me instead of just filling the hole. And somewhere in all that busy, I forgot about me — physically, and honestly, in a few other ways too. It’s easy to tell yourself that carrying everyone else is the whole job, and that whatever’s left of you at the end of the day doesn’t matter enough to tend to.

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” — 1 Corinthians 6:19–20

That’s a man’s weight, a dad’s weight — not a sixteen-year-old’s. My son didn’t put that shadow on himself by skipping the gym or skipping sleep to hold a family together. Mine, I built one busy season at a time, the same way most men do — by deciding, without ever saying it out loud, that everyone else’s needs came before mine long enough that I stopped counting mine at all. Sometimes the weight you’re under doesn’t announce itself. It just quietly becomes the new normal, until something — a scale, a mirror, a hundred pounds later — makes you look at it directly.

The Love We Forget

I’ve written before about the church at Ephesus — how Jesus commends them for their hard work and their discernment, and then says one thing against them: they’d forsaken the love they had at first.

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.” — Revelation 2:4–5

What strikes me watching my son drag his feet toward that door is that his shadow wasn’t really about school. A sixteen-year-old doesn’t wake up hopeless over a class schedule. Something underneath it had gone quiet — some spark that used to make ordinary mornings feel like an adventure had dimmed, and he didn’t even have the words for what he’d lost. That’s exactly what first love is. It’s not just romance, and it’s not just religious zeal. It’s the wonder that hasn’t yet been talked out of itself by disappointment.

God says almost the same thing to Israel through Jeremiah, earlier in his ministry, before Lamentations was ever written: “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness.” — Jeremiah 2:2. He’s not scolding them for growing up. He’s grieving that they let the wilderness talk them out of the wonder. Life will do that to a sixteen-year-old and a fifty-year-old the exact same way — one disappointment at a time, until the mornings stop feeling new and start feeling like something to survive.

The Shadow That Isn't the Whole Story

Here's what I didn't say to my son in the driveway, because he wasn't ready to hear it yet, but I'll say it here: the shadow he was drowning in this morning is real, but it isn't the whole story of his day, and it was never going to be the last word.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." — John 1:5

"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts." — 2 Corinthians 4:6

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." — Psalm 23:4

Notice what none of these verses promise. They don't promise the shadow disappears the moment you want it to. They promise it doesn't get the final say. My son's darkness this morning wasn't a sign God had left the room. It was a sign he needed someone to remind him the door he was dreading was still standing in the same mercy his brother was running toward. The shadow was real. It just wasn't bigger than the light that was already in the room with him.

The World Wants Us Alone With Our Shadow

Part of what keeps a shadow like that fed is how loud the world is willing to get about it. We get in a rush in life. We want so much, and in the wanting, we forget the simple things that actually matter — your health, your family, your finances, your faith. Sit down and count everything the world asks of us on a given day: drink this, eat that, brush your teeth, moisturize your skin, take your vitamins, get your exercise, comb your hair, read fifteen minutes a day, learn an instrument, check your email, keep your calendar, be organized, have goals, prioritize them, check your streaming platforms, check Facebook, check Twitch, check X, check Snapchat, keep your streaks alive. And the list keeps going.

None of those things are evil on their own. Stacked together, they turn into a treadmill dressed up as self-improvement — motion without arrival. And the world isn't quiet about the loneliness underneath it, either. It's blatant about it. Mainstream movies will spend two hours pointing out everybody's imperfections, telling us we need to come together, and never once show us what actual fulfillment looks like once we do. We get the diagnosis on repeat and never the cure.

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." — John 10:10

Christ's mission was never "manage more, optimize more, add one more thing to the list." His mission was rest, purpose, and people — actually finding each other instead of just being reminded, on a screen, that we're supposed to.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." — Matthew 11:28

That's the difference between the world's list and Christ's mission. The world's list ends in a streak you're terrified to break. Christ's mission ends in rest you didn't have to earn — the same rest my son needed more than he needed a pep talk about his class schedule.

From Apathy to Actual Joy

This is where it gets practical, because "cheer up" has never once healed anybody's apathy, and I wasn't about to try that line on a sixteen-year-old drowning in his own shadow.

Scripture doesn't tell us to manufacture happiness out of nothing. It tells us something much stranger — that joy and hardship can occupy the same room at the same time:

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” — James 1:2–3

“The joy of the LORD is your strength.” — Nehemiah 8:10

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines... yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” — Habakkuk 3:17–18

Apathy tells you the outcome is already decided, so there's no point getting up for it. Joy, biblically, isn't the absence of a hard outcome — it's a decision made before you know the outcome, anchored in who God is rather than in how the day is likely to go. Habakkuk wrote that verse staring at empty vines and empty stalls, not a good harvest. He wasn't rejoicing because things were fine. He was rejoicing because God was still God whether the fig tree budded or not.

That's the muscle I want to build in my son, and honestly, the same one I have to keep rebuilding in myself: joy isn't the reward for a good first day. It's the fuel you bring into an uncertain one, because the mercy under your feet was never dependent on how the day turns out.

What I Actually Told Him

I didn't get all of that into a driveway conversation with a sixteen-year-old, and I'm not sure I needed to. What I told him was simpler: today is new. Not because school got easier overnight, not because whatever's been sitting on him disappeared — but because God doesn't hand out yesterday's mercy twice. He hands out fresh mercy every morning, on the good days and the heavy ones, to the boy running for the door and the boy dragging his feet toward it. Neither one of them earned it. Both of them got it anyway.

I watched his brother practically skip to the car with that light still in his eyes, grateful that boy remembers, most mornings, what it feels like to expect something good. And I put my hand on the other one's shoulder and reminded him that the shadow he woke up under this morning doesn't get to write tomorrow's story too — that his first love, the wonder he used to wake up with, isn't gone, it's just waiting on him to come looking for it again, the same way I keep having to come looking for mine, one made bed and one honest morning at a time.

A Prayer for First Days

Lord, thank You that Your mercies don't run out overnight — that every morning is a fresh issue of Your compassion, not a continuation of yesterday's failures or yesterday's weight. For the ones of us walking into today with light in our eyes, keep us grateful and keep us from ever thinking we earned it. For the ones of us drowning in a shadow we can't quite name, remind us the darkness doesn't get the final word — that You are already in the room with us. Help us find our way back to the love we had at first, the wonder we let the wilderness, and the world's endless list, talk us out of. Teach us Habakkuk's kind of joy — not the joy that waits for good news, but the joy that rejoices in You before the outcome is even known. And where the world tries to convince us we're alone, remind us Your mission was always rest and life to the full, not one more thing to manage. Make every first day feel like the gift it actually is. Amen.

Sit With It

1. Where in your life has a “new morning” started feeling like just a continuation of yesterday's weight?

2. What weight — physical, emotional, spiritual — have you been carrying that you stopped noticing because you were too busy holding everything else together?
3. Who in your life — a child, a spouse, a friend — is walking into their day dragging a shadow they can't name? What would it cost you to notice?
4. What did your “first love” — for Christ, for a calling, for someone you love — actually feel like? When did the wilderness, or the world's endless list, start talking you out of it?
5. Habakkuk rejoiced before the harvest came in. Where is God asking you to rejoice before you know how something turns out?
6. What's one small, unglamorous act of order — your own “make your bed” — that could remind you every morning that today is new?

— *BigTop*