

“Blessing of the Students”

Lamentations 2:19

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Over twenty years ago, I began a tradition at the First Baptist Church of Somerset at the beginning of the school year. I asked all the students, from preschool to graduate school, to come to the platform at the end of a worship service, so we could pray for them.

As the years went by, I added other components to this student blessing. I asked the teachers and school administrators to stand and included them in the prayer. I asked a photographer to take a group picture of our children so it could be posted for everyone to see. I asked student leaders to print the names of our children on slips of paper, so church members could take one home and pray for that child throughout the school year.

I recall being influenced by Jeremiah’s challenge to his people in Lamentations 2:19. “Lift up your hands to Him for the lives of your children.” This was the prophet’s way of instructing his people to pray for the welfare of the children.

What better time to do this, I thought, than the beginning of the school year. It would send a clear message to the students of the importance of getting a good education and being connected to a faith family who would love and support them. I am pleased this will now become a tradition at First Baptist.

Why do we need to pray for our children? We need to pray for the same reason Jeremiah instructed his people to pray for their children. Times were hard, and their children needed divine help.

It was a time of chaos, confusion and danger in Jeremiah’s beloved homeland. Jerusalem lay in ruins in 587BC after the Babylonians destroyed it. Many citizens were exiled to Babylon, and those who remained in Jerusalem lived in fear and want.

Jeremiah knew the children were most vulnerable and needed protection from harm, provisions for their physical needs, peace in the midst of turmoil, strength in a time of

adversity, guidance in a fog of confusion, confidence in the face of challenges and hope in the midst of despair.

These were overwhelming needs and could not be satisfied by even the most loving and responsible parents. They needed help, and Jeremiah was aware of it. "Lift up your hands to Him for the lives of your children," he told his neighbors. That was good advice for those adults. It is good advice for us.

For what do we need to pray? What do our children need in these unsettling times? While our situation is certainly different from Jeremiah's, I suspect the needs of our children are similar. In many ways, our children are also growing up in a world acquainted with chaos, confusion and danger. Terrorist attacks, sexual predators, drug dealers, drunk drivers, abusive parents and negative peer pressure are contributing to the risks. The pitfalls and challenges facing our children are daunting, for them and us. We all need God's help to steer safely through these turbulent waters.

Allow me to suggest some things you might want to include in your prayers. Of course, you will need to be more specific as you become aware of particular concerns.

Pray that our children will realize how much they matter to God and to all of us. Many children struggle with self-esteem issues as they grow and develop. It is easy for them to get lost in the crowd and feel insignificant. Ask God to help them realize how important each one is to God and us, even as God helps us to listen to, affirm and encourage everyone of them.

Ask God to help our children to see their potential. One reason children underachieve is because talents are not recognized and cultivated. Pray that God will use school teachers, church leaders, parents and other family members to help each child see his or her abilities so goals can be set and pursued.

In many communities in Japan, it is the custom to tear down and rebuild wooden temples at certain intervals. This is done for two reasons; to teach the younger generation how to build, and to give them the confidence they need to do so.

Three generations of master craftsmen are employed for each job: the apprentices who are learning the trade; the middle aged master craftsmen who have lived through one rebuilding; and senior citizens who have been through this procedure twice and serve as

coaches. What a practical way this is to bring generations together to teach a skill and instill confidence in the young.

Ask God to help our children dream and make plans for their lives. Kids have vivid imaginations that transport them into the world of a better tomorrow. Pray they never lose it.

Neil Armstrong was in the news again last week. You recall he was the first man to walk on the moon after the lunar module, *Eagle*, landed on July 20, 1969. A week ago, Armstrong had cardiac bypass surgery to open four blocked arteries. It appears all went as planned, and he is doing well.

One of my favorite stories about Armstrong occurred in the spring of his senior year of high school. He was walking by the home of his physics and chemistry teacher, Mr. Crites. Armstrong paused for a visit with Mr. and Mrs. Crites on their front porch, as was the custom in his small Ohio town.

When it came time for Neil to leave, they stepped down from the porch into the light of a great silvery moon. "Neil," Mr. Crites asked, "what are you going to do with your life?" Neil smiled and looked up at the moon. "Mr. Crites," he responded, "I'd like to visit the man up there." That was 1946, twenty-three years before the first moon landing.

Pray that our children never quit dreaming and pursuing their dreams with the same kind of determination that Neil Armstrong did. It is not easy to have faith in your own ideas, especially when surrounded by skeptics.

Ask God to give our children wisdom to make good decisions. Potential is also unfulfilled because bad decisions are made which have devastating consequences. Children fail to realize this sometimes, and sabotage their own futures.

Our children need God's help to say no to things that are harmful and yes to things that are good. Ask God to help them discern between good and bad and see the consequences of both. Then, ask God to help them make healthy choices which will open doors of opportunity for years to come.

It has been reported that Abraham Lincoln voiced a prayer for his young son, Robert Todd, as he began school. "Teach him that it is far more honorable to fail than to cheat," was a

part of that prayer. Lincoln knew the connection between character and success. I hope we do, too, and pass it on to our children.

Ask God to bring wise teachers, good friends and positive role models into our children's lives. It really does take a village to mold and shape our children, and all children need to be surrounded by people who bring the best out in them.

Several years ago a sociology professor had his class go into the Baltimore slums to get case histories on 200 children. They were asked to write an evaluation of each child's future. In almost every case, the students wrote, "This child doesn't have a chance. I see nothing but problems ahead."

Twenty-five years later, another professor sent students out of the classroom to find these individuals to see what happened to them. They located 180 of the 200 and were shocked. One hundred seventy-six had achieved phenomenal success and were outstanding citizens of their communities. Each was asked, "How do you account for your success?" In each case, the reply came with feeling, "I had a teacher who cared about me and made a difference in my life."

Pray that our children will be surrounded by good, encouraging role models.

Ask God to help our children be good positive models. As much as they need support, they also need to provide it. Ask God to help our children be good stewards of their influence, lifting their peers to new heights.

Ask God to give our children discipline to be good students. Our children face many distractions which would keep them from seeing the importance of their studies. They need God's help to stay focused.

In Lincoln's school prayer for his son, he also said, "Teach him the wonder of books." It appears that Lincoln believed that a hunger for learning would lead to self-discipline and direction. I believe it will, too.

Ask God to give our children the confidence needed to accept and tackle challenges that will be placed before them. Many children struggle with inferiority. It is common for them to compare themselves to others and feel inadequate. It is normal to be gripped with the paralyzing fear of failure and avoid challenges which would unleash hidden abilities.

Ask God to give them the confidence they need to take risks and go down uncharted paths. Also, ask God to go with them, especially when they must travel those roads alone.

I have been intrigued by the South African sprinter in the Olympics, Oscar Pistorius. He was born with birth defects in both legs, and before he was a year old his legs were amputated below the knees. Twenty-four years later, he is running in the Olympics with the aid of artificial legs.

This is not the first time he has excelled in sports. In spite of his handicap, in school he played tennis, rugby, water polo and was a wrestler. He never shied away from challenges or let the fear of failure keep him from pursuing his dreams. He worked hard, probably harder than most of his peers, and achieved goals others refused to pursue.

Pray that God will give our children this level of confidence and courage so they will set lofty goals and tackle life's toughest challenges.

Ask God to encourage our children when they are disappointed. A small child was having a bad week and said to her teacher, "Some days you need a Saturday on a Wednesday." Don't we all?

Every venture or relationship will not succeed, resulting in great disappointment. It is easy to give up when things don't work out as expected, especially if you did your best.

Ask God to be close to our children when their dreams are shattered, hearts are broken and egos are bruised. Ask God to help our children learn from failure and disappointment so they will be stronger and better prepared for the future.

Ask God to help our children have fun and enjoy these years. School days can be some of the best in a person's life as he or she develops lasting relationships and spends time with friends. Ask God to help our children choose good friends and engage in healthy activities which will relieve stress, not add to it.

Ask God to forgive them when they make mistakes and let them know they are still loved. Children need to be affirmed, especially after they have done wrong. They need to know that God's love is unconditional, and His grace is sufficient to rebuild their self-esteem and lives. Ask God to make our homes and this church a place where they experience this kind of love and hope when they have made mistakes.

Ask God to give our children peaceful homes filled with affirmation, warmth and encouragement. Ask Him to provide every child with parents who make their well-being a priority, even if their parents are divorced or have re-married.

Finally, pray that God will protect our children from evil and harm. Jesus included this in his model prayer when he said, “Deliver us from evil.” Schools are not as safe as they once were, and our children need divine protection.

I’ll conclude with one of my favorite verses about children penned in The Prophet by Lebanese-American artist, poet, philosopher and writer, Kahlil Gibran.

“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not of you, and though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies, but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backwards nor carries with yesterday. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and he bends you to his might that his arrows may go swift and far. Let your bending in the archer’s hand be for gladness, for even as he loves the arrow that flies, so he also loves the bow that is stable.”

“Lift up your hands to Him for the lives of your children.”

Will you join me in praying for our children as they begin another school year? If so, as you leave in a few moments, take a slip of paper that has a child’s name on it. Keep it in your Bible or devotional material as a reminder to pray for this student every day.

