

Marcus DePeal • AJ Wilk

THE FOUNDATION

Creating a Life
Centered on Jesus

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To our parents Ken, Karen, Alan, and Sue:

Your mentorship and constant support has made it possible for us to believe in ourselves enough to try things as daunting as writing a book. You are the ones who helped us build our lives on the foundation of Jesus, and without you we wouldn't be where we are today.

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
The First Pillar: Transformed.....	9
Chapter One: Testimonies.....	11
Chapter Two: Yesterdays.....	16
Chapter Three: Identity.....	23
Chapter Four: Holiness.....	30
Chapter Five: The Word	38
Chapter Six: Prayer.....	45
The Second Pillar: Connected.....	55
Chapter Seven: Charitable Love.....	57
Chapter Eight: Forgiveness.....	65
Chapter Nine: Confession	73
Chapter Ten: Accountability	81
Chapter Eleven: The Church	89
Chapter Twelve: Relationship Rules.....	97
The Third Pillar: Sent.....	107
Chapter Thirteen: The Role of the Spirit.....	109
Chapter Fourteen: Spiritual Gifts.....	118
Chapter Fifteen: Evangelism.....	126
Chapter Sixteen: Discipling Others.....	135
Chapter Seventeen: Second Calling.....	142
Chapter Eighteen: The Long Game.....	149
Conclusion: Words for the Mentees.....	157
Acknowledgments.....	160
Notes.....	163

INTRODUCTION

WHO WE ARE

This book is co-authored by Marcus DePeal and AJ Wilk, two pastors at Trinity Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. We have the privilege of leading a college and young adult ministry called Awaken Campuses, which exists to see eighteen-to-thirty-year-olds transformed by God, connected to the church, and sent into the world. With everything in us, we believe that this age group has the potential to change the world around them for the cause of Jesus Christ. We believe young adults have the perfect mixture of zeal, courage, and naivety to believe passionately for God to bring an awakening to his church, and we want to do everything we can to tap into that beautiful blend.

Despite being on opposite sides of a heated Michigan-Michigan State sports rivalry when we met in college, we quickly realized we had much more valuable things in common. It was in these college years that God radically changed both of our lives, marking our hearts forever with a longing for more of his presence. In a season of life where we had more freedom than ever before and were trying to discover our purpose in the world, it was as if the Spirit seized the opportunity to awaken a hunger neither of us had ever experienced. Thankfully, we've had wonderful mentors and (much wiser) believers surround us, helping steward the passion that God has stirred. Simply put, we want to offer these same opportunities for both awakening and mentorship to any young adults that desire it.

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WHY THIS BOOK?

According to the Barna Research Group, the greatest exodus of Christians leaving the church is happening in college students and young adults. The latest research (2019) has shown that the percentage of young-adult church dropouts, specified as those eighteen to twenty-nine who grew up in the church, has increased from 59 percent to 64 percent.¹ This means that almost two-thirds of the children and youth the church spends countless amounts of time, energy, and resources pouring into are walking away from their Creator the moment they are free to make decisions for themselves. We don't know about you, but we're not okay with that. As leaders of a college and young adult ministry ourselves, these numbers are personal for us.

A question that just about everyone wants to know the answer to is, well, why? What's making all these young adults walk out of the same doors they were flooding into just twenty years ago? There's a great deal of hypotheses and conjecture (not to mention conferences and seminars) trying to make sense of these numbers, some being backed up by surveys and empirical data and others by anecdotal evidence. In an extremely risky attempt to summarize all the research that has been done by others and our own experience, here are what we believe to be the three main reasons eighteen to twenty-nine-year-olds are leaving the church in droves:

1. They don't see the church as relevant. For many young adults, the church has become old, antiquated, and outdated. Many of them would tell you that times have changed, and certain rules or regulations don't matter anymore – we've become too legalistic. In some areas they are probably right, and in others we have failed to communicate just how relevant the good news of Jesus really is. At some of the most critical junctures in modern culture, the church has unfortunately fallen silent. Young adults are craving truth and purpose, and we believe the church can offer them both.

INTRODUCTION

2. They don't see the church as relational. This problem is twofold: Young adults often don't see God as a relational being who desires to know them deeply, and they believe the Christians inside of his church aren't all that different. Often, they feel like the church is an institution that exists to tell them everything they're doing wrong instead of joining them on the path to life. We have at times accidentally communicated a picture of an angry God in heaven as opposed to an empathetic and loving Father.

3. They don't see the church as redemptive. Maybe the greatest problem of them all, too many young adults have experienced a version of church that contradicts the God who leads it. They have been abused, mistreated, manipulated, or taken advantage of. Because they burned their hand on the stove, they have no desire to touch it again. Can you blame them? The church is meant to be full of agents of reconciliation, constantly bringing about hope, redemption, and unity in our world – not discouragement, chaos, and division.

With all of that said, we don't believe all hope is lost. Instead, we believe there is a hunger for truth and an all-encompassing love that lingers within our human nature that we are praying for God to awaken yet again. That is why we designed *The Foundation* to help young adults see the gospel and the church as *relevant* to their lives. To see how God's Word can be trusted, and that God has given them a purpose that surpasses anything this world could offer. Not only that, but this was also crafted to be *relational*. As a book that facilitates a mentoring relationship, we want to promote deep, meaningful, multi-generational ministry throughout the broader church. As young adults learn about the relationship their God wants to have with them, we believe they can experience it more richly through the presence of a mentor. Finally, this resource is meant to be *redemptive*. We pray that the mentoring relationship along with the content within this book can create a positive experience for young adults who journey through it, redeeming negative experiences from their past.

THE FOUNDATION

The future of the church rests on what we do about the problem of young adults walking away from Jesus. This is a moment when we can't afford to look the other way. We are being called by the Holy Spirit to lean in. Together.

HOW IT WORKS

To lay a foundation for a house, it takes a team. It's nearly impossible to do that degree of construction alone, and we believe that same truth applies to laying a spiritual foundation as well. For that reason, *The Foundation* was created to be journeyed through by at least two people: a mentor and their mentee(s). We put this together in a way in which both the mentor and mentee would read a chapter on their own time, and then meet afterwards to discuss the content of it. Within each chapter, the mentor will be provided with resources (see "additional resources" page) to spark and facilitate healthy conversation, while the mentee will be given intentional space and prompts to either reflect on or respond to the contents of each chapter.

Additionally, a good foundation of a home is meant to be strong, able to bear high amounts of pressure and weight. Core to any foundation are the pillars that help support it, making sure the house doesn't collapse upon itself. In order to help mentees build a faith that can withstand whatever life throws at them, this book focuses on building what we call the three pillars of *The Foundation*: Transformed, Connected, and Sent. Each pillar consists of six chapters that would be discussed in six subsequent mentoring meetings. The three pillars together create a holistic discipleship experience for mentees, bringing to life the richness of the gospel while calling them to be the greatest versions of themselves – awakening a deep sense of identity, calling, and purpose. Together, the eighteen chapters and meetings were designed to be completed biweekly, spanning a total of thirty-six weeks (about the length of an academic year for college students).

INTRODUCTION

While we believe in the content within this book, the most important part of *The Foundation* is the mentoring relationship itself. We hope this book will provide a sort of springboard or launching pad for holy moments and intentional conversations to take place. But if at any point the book becomes a hindrance to the relationship, set it aside and follow the leading of the Spirit – the one who is ultimately in charge.

FINAL WORDS

Before you dive into this journey, we'd like to say two short things. First, true discipleship isn't for the faint of heart. Yes, this program is long, but an apprenticeship to Jesus is something that never ends. If you are in it for the long haul, you're in the right place. Second, we love you and are so grateful for you. To the mentors, our vision for *The Foundation* would be impossible without you. The investment you are making in a young adult is of immeasurable value in light of eternity. To those being mentored, we commend your humility and hunger for more. May God use this book and your mentor to mark your heart forever with the love of Jesus.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For the Mentee: While we have provided space for you to write inside of this book and answer questions at the end of each chapter, we realize some of you may prefer an alternative. Because of that, we created a downloadable PDF with all of the same questions within the book for you to print, answering the questions that way if you'd like. This PDF can be found at:

www.awakencampuses.com/thefoundationmentee

For the Mentor: There are eighteen chapters in this book, meaning there will also be eighteen meetings between you and your mentee. *That's a lot.* Given the volume of meetings, we don't expect you to always know how to start the conversation or facilitate that many mentoring sessions. To help you, we created a downloadable PDF that will let you know what questions your mentee was supposed to answer before your meeting, give you possible questions to ask, and give you a challenge you can pass along to your mentee each week. This PDF and all other instructions can be found at:

www.awakencampuses.com/thefoundationmentor

THE FIRST PILLAR:

TRANSFORMED

Saint Augustine was a brilliant writer and theologian, and one of the most influential church fathers. But before he brought revolutionary ways of seeing God to the church, Augustine had very little interest in God. Instead, he preferred things such as having sex and stealing pears from a neighbor nearby.¹ When Augustine finally found Jesus, his conversion was drastic. There's a famous story of him walking down the street, passing by a mistress or a prostitute that he used to have relations with. Seeing her former lover, she called to him, "Augustine, it is I!" Augustine, radically changed by the power of God through the Holy Spirit, kept on walking and said, "Yes, but it is no longer I!"²

You see, the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't something that is strictly informational or transactional. It's not just an interesting story from the past, and it's much more than a "get out of hell free" card. The gospel, or the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is something that has the power to completely *transform* a human being – so much so that when tempted to return to their old life they would walk the other way saying the words, "It is no longer I."

The Word of God is full of this kind of transformation language, saying that "if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"³ alongside the belief that "no one can see the kingdom

THE FOUNDATION

of God unless they are born again.”⁴ As we journey through this first pillar of *The Foundation*, we will attempt to uncover exactly what all of this means by diving into our stories (the good and the ugly), exploring our first callings as Christians (to be children of God who live holy lives), and taking a deeper look at the presence of God (through the Word and prayer).

It is our prayer that as you read these first six chapters you would become aware that your past doesn't define you, that sin has lost its power over you, and that God readily invites you into his presence to make you more like him. That you have truly been, and will continue to be, *transformed by God*.

CHAPTER ONE

TESTIMONIES

Marcus DePeal

IKEA is without a doubt one of my favorite stores in the world. Laugh all you want; I don't really care. As if the sleek design, incredible layout, and unbeatable prices weren't enough, there's a food court right in the middle of the whole thing (with some of the world's best meatballs, I might add)! No, I'm not the biggest fan of having to assemble all the furniture myself, but that's a very small price to pay for what I consider to be a glorious experience.

Despite IKEA's unparalleled greatness, some people can't stand the place. To me, that's like hating ice cream or roller coasters. To each their own, I guess. Anyway, I'm fully convinced that my grandma would've been an IKEA-hater. The reason I suspect such criminal behavior from her is because she *loved* antiques. She was the kind of person that just *had* to stop anytime she saw one. She loved furniture that was unique, furniture that had a story behind it. Even now, I can vividly remember moments when she would explain the history of an inanimate object that was supposedly three times my age. You know what I'm talking about; stories that go like this:

Well, Marcus, this lamp was once in my pastor's great-aunt Gertrude's house. She would pray by this lamp every night before

THE FOUNDATION

bed, and one time when she asked God for a sign, the lightbulb flickered. It turns out, that same night, at the exact time the light bulb flickered, my pastor was called into ministry, and ...

Well—you get the idea. Needless to say, I'll be sticking to my IKEA-style furniture for the time being and will be donating any Aunt Gertrude lamps to Goodwill.

While I may not agree with my grandma on her furniture preferences, I would agree with her approach when it comes to people. I believe that far too often we see people as IKEA furniture when they're much more like antiques. Human beings aren't carbon copies of one another, coming neatly packaged with a set of instructions on how they work. As people, we're complex. Unique. Difficult to place in any single box. Like an antique dresser, we have scuffs and scratches on our hearts that have stories attached to them. We have bumps and bruises on our bodies that have built character over the years. Like an old desk with a drawer that doesn't open properly, we each have beautiful quirks that make up the person we are. The question is, are we willing to see them?

NICE TO MEET YOU

Being a pastor's kid and now being in ministry myself, I've had the incredible privilege of hearing testimonies all my life. Whether around a bonfire, in a cabin at camp, or at a coffee shop, listening to people sharing their stories of God's faithfulness in their lives never seems to get old for me. Instead, it always reminds me of my own story, and how God has always been chasing after me.

Growing up, it felt like my family was always moving somewhere new. I was born in New York, moved to Illinois when I was two, to Michigan when I was four, Pennsylvania when I was eleven, Michigan (again) when I was sixteen, and then went to college in Indiana at eighteen. I now live in Indianapolis, and I'm praying God doesn't continue this trend of

CHAPTER ONE - TESTIMONIES

moving me all over the place – I’m good for now. Despite growing up in a Christian home, in the middle of all those moves I began to run away from the Lord. Around the age of fifteen, I began to value things like popularity and social status over the affirmation of my heavenly Father. I traded in the peace of the Holy Spirit and decided to feed appetites of lust, pride, and a litany of other cheap things that ultimately led me to a very broken and lost place.

Honestly, I was confused. There was a void in my heart that popularity, alcohol, drugs, and sex wasn’t filling. I was having a lot of fun, but I still felt *empty*. Moments where I was happy, but didn’t really have *joy*. To make a long story short, after my sophomore year of high school, I moved from Pennsylvania to Michigan and everything changed. I immediately got plugged into a youth group that was passionate about following the Lord, and I could tell they had something I didn’t. They didn’t seem to feel the same void in their souls that I’d been feeling.

I began to listen to their testimonies, realizing that they weren’t so different from me. Some had been in the party scene only to realize that Christian community was better. Others woke up to the truth that the presence of Jesus was a much better high than the drugs they were using. Even others confessed that things like pornography and sex hadn’t worked for them either, but the love of the Father had satisfied a much deeper longing in their souls. The decision for me was simple at that point: whatever they had, I wanted it. And, praise God, I got it.

I DON’T HAVE A STORY LIKE THAT

Just about every time I get the opportunity to share my story with someone, I’m always interested to hear theirs right after. Nothing encourages my faith more than a redemption story. However, there have been multiple times that after I’m done sharing, the person across from me will get a bit quiet when it’s their turn to share. When I ask what’s wrong, the

THE FOUNDATION

answer is always fairly similar. “Well, my story isn’t that exciting, nothing crazy has really happened. I don’t have a story like *that*.”

If this is something you’ve ever said or something that you were beginning to think as you heard my story, I want to say something very clear to you: You have a beautiful story. The fact that you don’t have any wild sins to confess, or any significant trauma is a sign of God’s loving protection over your life. The fact that you have a great family or have never experienced financial struggle is a sign of God’s provision for you.

Just because your dresser has a few less scratches in it than mine doesn’t mean your story is boring or that God has been less active in your life.

The truth is, I wish my story was less eventful. I certainly wish it was less rebellious. As amazing as his redemption has been in my life and as cool as it can be to tell the stories of my scars, they were painful to get. No story is better than another. Every testimony, even yours, is a treasure to God.

Throughout our lives, we will have the wonderful opportunity to encounter thousands of unique individuals. As we do, we need to remember that we’re not at IKEA, but at an antique store. Below the surface, every single person has a complex, fascinating story of God’s faithfulness in their lives whether they know it or not.

Before you’re able to see that in other people, you need to first see it in yourself. You need to retrace your steps, recounting the moments that led you to the place you are today. A mature believer is able to find the faith that is needed for today by remembering God’s faithfulness from the past. As we commit to growing together on this journey, remembering your own testimony is the first step.

CHAPTER ONE - TESTIMONIES

Notes: Are there any questions you have from the chapter? Was there anything in the chapter you felt God highlighting in your heart, or something new you learned you'd like to write down?

Reflect: Use the space below to list the 5-7 most significant “testimony” moments of your life. These could be moments you saw God come through, heard him speak clearly, or use you in a powerful way. How did these moments influence your journey?

Challenge: When you meet with your mentor, write down the “Chapter Challenge” they give you in this space.

CHAPTER TWO

YESTERDAYS

AJ Wilk

My favorite movies have always been the ones that develop a world that draws you in completely. I'm talking about the movies where you forget you're sitting on a couch and instead end up believing you're the one learning to disarm your opponent in Hogwarts Castle, or asking Alfred to research a new suit in the Batcave. If those movie references just flew over your head, a quick Google search of *Harry Potter* or *The Dark Knight* will bring you up to speed, but taking the time to watch the movies would be well worth it. There's something so captivating about experiencing another world, seeing characters like Harry Potter and Bruce Wayne grow into the heroes that save their worlds. As in all great movies though, before those compelling moments of heroism, there is always something significant for the main character to overcome in their personal lives. Both Harry's and Bruce's parents were tragically murdered when they were just kids. Each of them had moments when their sense of duty to the mission drove a wedge between their friendships, and both made personal decisions that they deeply regretted. These two characters who go on to do amazing things experienced immense hardship before they ever defeated their respective villains and became the heroes we were cheering on in the end.

CHAPTER TWO - YESTERDAYS

Many of us can connect with these characters so well because our lives are full of similar contrasts. From mountaintop moments of joy to heart-break and trauma, each one of us can look back at our story over the years and recount times of rejoicing and pain. Because of the fall – humanity choosing to rebel against God and bringing brokenness into the world – we now experience suffering in a way we were never designed to. Looking back at my own life, I see the deaths of family members, fractured relationships with close friends, and my own personal struggles. It's likely that you also can think back over your life and see the areas that you have fallen short, places others have wounded you, or even moments this life hasn't been what you thought it would be. It is these things – our own sin, trauma, and disappointments – that make up what we call our “yesterdays.” The question is not, Do we have yesterdays? The question is instead, what do we do with them?

FULLY LOVED

Like plenty of strong believers, one of the most important moments in my spiritual journey took place while I was in college. I can still remember the day when a mentor of mine took the time to listen to my *entire* story. We sat down at the school coffeehouse with the chatter of other conversations around us, but all I could hear was my mentor's voice saying, “I'd love to hear your story, AJ.” I began to share a few of the major highlights from my life, and my mentor kindly smiled, sipped his drink, and asked me to go a bit deeper, to share the hardships and sin-struggles of my life. A bit nervous, I glanced around the loud coffee shop and continued to share. The highlights, yes, but also the lowlights – sin, trauma, and disappointments. As a young, optimistic eighteen-year-old, I hadn't often paused to intentionally reflect on my yesterdays. Taking time to remember the moments where I'd hurt others, made a huge mistake, or was on the receiving end of deep pain wasn't exactly my version of a “good time” in college. Despite my hesitancy, I will never forget the amount of love and freedom I began to experience with my mentor as I slowly started to open up. It was as if years of dead weight was slowing

THE FOUNDATION

being lifted off my soul, weight that I hadn't even realized I was carrying. Talking openly with another person about the struggles of my yesterdays certainly wasn't easy; in fact, it was nerve-wracking in the moment. But, I will always be grateful that someone saw the worst parts of me and still chose to listen closely, respond lovingly, and not give up on me.

The reason this moment was so meaningful for me is because of how well my mentor showed me the heart of Jesus. In John 4 Jesus is sitting by a well as his friends go off to find food. As he waits, a local Samaritan woman arrives to draw some water, and they begin to strike up a conversation that quickly takes an unexpected turn for the woman. As the all-knowing Son of God, Jesus begins to bring up some of the most dark and embarrassing parts of this woman's life. Her yesterdays were filled with five previous marriages, and a current relationship that was unlawful. She was simply coming for water, and instead found herself caught red-handed by a seemingly mysterious prophet. However, instead of heaping rightful condemnation upon her head, Jesus graciously reveals himself as the Messiah to her. Instead of leaving with judgment, the woman leaves with joy.

As the story goes, "Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?'"¹ There's no question this woman's encounter with Jesus marked her forever.

**She was fully seen – the good, bad,
and ugly all exposed before Jesus –
and yet, she was fully loved.**

Just as I did with my mentor, the woman at the well experienced the beautiful phenomenon many of us have heard about in God's Word – perfect love casts out all fear.² Any guilt, shame, or condemnation that attempts to creep into our hearts due to our yesterdays stands no chance in the face of Christ's deep love for us.

CHAPTER TWO - YESTERDAYS

BEAUTIFULLY UNIQUE, SURPRISINGLY COMMON

It's only natural as you read this to begin to have different parts of your story pop into your mind. As we established in chapter 1, every person and every path is unique. We're not IKEA furniture; we're originals – antiques. Handmade and built by our Father with creativity and excellence, which we'll cover more in the next chapter. While all of that is true, we have a surprising amount in common, one of the greatest commonalities being hardship itself. Unfortunately, none of us have been lucky enough to escape the suffering, death, and decay that exist in this fallen world as a result of our sin. Instead, almost all of us find ourselves believing that our yesterdays disqualify us from any hopeful tomorrows.

One of the reasons a simple story of a Samaritan woman is so powerful is that we can all see ourselves in her shoes. As we read the story, we don't know much about her – not even her name (although church tradition has named her Photiné).³ What we do know is this: Growing up in a town called Sychar, Photiné probably longed for a great life with a wonderful husband and loving children. Her aspirations and dreams as a young girl did not line up with her current reality. The woman that drew water from the well in John 4 fell drastically short of the woman she planned on being. Five broken marriages and an unlawful relationship led her to a place where even the other women in her town wouldn't go draw water with her because of her past. Her life was filled with disappointment, shame, sorrow, and failure – things she was likely feeling on her way to the well that very day. Then, Photiné met Jesus.

THE REDEMPTION OF GOD

There's very little doubt that Photiné thought her yesterdays disqualified her from a hopeful future. How could God use someone who had sinned so greatly, who had been mistreated so deeply? Someone who was likely

THE FOUNDATION

seen as damaged goods by some and a prostitute by others? Listen to the way the story ends:

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.⁴

This story started in brokenness, baggage, and despair. It started with a woman who had likely given up on any hope of being loved or having a significant purpose in the world. How did it end? With healing, freedom, and hope. With a life set on fire for a new purpose, telling others about this man named Jesus – the one who looked her yesterdays in the eye and said, "You're no match for my love."

WHAT ABOUT ME?

There are two groups of people I'd love to address. The first group are those who read the story of Photiné and say, "My yesterdays are nowhere near that bad. I don't need to be redeemed from five failed marriages; I'm actually doing pretty well." It is all those who need to be reminded that the ground is level at the foot of the cross.⁵ Since all have fallen short, all are in equal need of a savior.

The second (and likely larger) group are those who find themselves saying, "That's great for Photiné, however you pronounce it. But what about me? What about my past?" You need to know you aren't alone. It can be strangely tempting to hear an incredible story of redemption and believe that it's for everyone except for you. That's how the enemy works.

Maybe you have past or current sin that you don't believe God can truly forgive. Maybe you were hurt or taken advantage of, and you seriously doubt there's true healing and redemption for what you've been through.

CHAPTER TWO - YESTERDAYS

Maybe there's a small voice in the back of your head telling you that you're the one person grace and forgiveness aren't available to. Regardless of what baggage you're carrying today, we know this for certain: all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.⁶ *All*. Every last one of us is in desperate need of redemption. We also know that despite our sin, and in fact while we were still in it, Christ chose to die for us.⁷ Now, all who call on his name, repent of their sin, and believe in him will be saved and receive forgiveness.⁸ No exceptions. *Not even you*. I believe that God wants to meet you at the well today just like he met Photiné thousands of years ago, and have you leave a far different person than when you came.

What would have happened if Harry Potter and Bruce Wayne had allowed their yesterdays to define them? Consume them? What if instead of rising above their pain they let it stop them from becoming the hero that was needed? More people would have been hurt. The enemy might have won. Thankfully, in a fictional world the stakes aren't *actually* very high. But they are for us.

We all have sin, trauma, and disappointments, but these are not meant to be the things that define us or our stories in the end. We have a God who is constantly at work to redeem our yesterdays and make sure no part of our past pain goes to waste. Your identity is *not* found in the things you have done or in what has happened to you. It's found in the One who made you.

Notes: Are there any questions you have from the chapter? Was there anything in the chapter you felt God highlighting in your heart, or something new you learned you'd like to write down?

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Reflect: Use the space below to list the 5-7 most significant “yesterday” moments of your life. These could be moments you fell into sin, times you experienced some form of trauma, or seasons you experienced significant disappointment. How did these moments shape you?

Challenge: When you meet with your mentor, write down the “Chapter Challenge” they give you in this space.
