

Hello! My name is Thomas Whalen, and I'm currently a sophomore at Edina High School, though I've been coming to Immanuel since I was born. I'd like to begin this statement with a brief prayer. Dear God, thank you for allowing me to be here today with others from my community of faith as we express and share our own personal beliefs with one another.

Writing this statement was significantly challenging for me, as I often feel unsure about what I believe. However, at the same time, it has allowed me deeper insight into my personal beliefs. For this reason, I will start this paper with what I am sure I believe, delving in my own doubts later into my writing.

I chose the 105th verse from psalm 119, "thy word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path", because I felt that it encompassed what I was most sure of in my faith. To me, this passage means that the ten commandments, writings in the Bible, and Jesus' teachings should serve as the outline of how one should live their life. The principles found in scripture allow one to lead a fulfilling lifestyle, spreading contentment to both themselves and those around them. For example, loving one's neighbor and parents as well as working hard to help others rather than hurt them is guaranteed to lead to more happiness for everyone, including oneself. Because of this, I try to follow the values and principles displayed in the Bible as often as I am able in my life.

One of my most important personal examples of applying this verse to my life came at the beginning of my previous school year, in freshman year of high school. In my first few weeks at my new center of learning, I couldn't stop thinking about my work. I was very stressed because of the transition to a year of school where my grades were suddenly very important, and could genuinely affect me later in my life. Because of this, my life felt chaotic, I was confused, and honestly scared too. *It's just the start of the year and the worst has yet to come*, I thought, but I was already overwhelmed with all the changes of high school. One night though, after contemplating what was truly important to me, I realized that I should focus less on school and instead channel that extra energy into keeping up with my friends and family. The teachings of the bible make it abundantly clear that familial and friendly relationships should be valued, especially in verses like Proverbs 18:24 which explains that "one who has unreliable friends

soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother”. For this reason, I followed the Lord’s guide by keeping my friends and family close across those next few weeks. This not only helped to improve my happiness, but actually made my school work easier as well because of my lowered stress after spending time with my friends, both online and in-person. This served as the most obvious proof in my life of the effectiveness and power of God’s teachings, and ever since then, I’ve found a way to balance my academics and other activities with my personal relationships.

On top of this, I find that being part of my faith community is important to me. Throughout my time at Immanuel, I’ve connected with many people, especially in my confirmation group. These new relationships have given me new opportunities to discuss not only faith with others, but many other things as well. Church services and volunteer opportunities also allow me to further develop my faith. One example of opportunities from church being helpful in my life is confirmation retreats. Every year, I would look forward to spending time with my confirmation group, as it was not only fun, but helped me learn as well. This again connects to my bible verse, as spiritual work and experiences at the confirmation retreats served as a “light unto my path” by allowing me to better connect to my faith and other members of the church. For these reasons, I will be sure to continue to spend time at Immanuel and with its activities in order to stay active in this community for years to come.

To continue, I’d like to discuss my beliefs that I’ve been talking about this entire essay. Knowing what to believe in is hard, and I’ve spent most of my faith life trying to do just that. By now, I’ve come to the conclusion that I think I believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, but I still have some amount of unsureness in these beliefs. I have yet to experience any “special faith moments” that I hear many other Christians talk about, which has not certainly helped me understand what I believe. However, based on scripture and the teachings of Jesus, I know that I want the Holy Trinity to exist because of the values it promotes. For this reason, I do believe in the Triune God and I choose to accept my confirmation in our religion today. On top of this, I will continue to seek out more experiences to help better shape and clarify my faith and beliefs, whether they are through our church or otherwise.

To end, I'm going to give a bit of an explanation of my Expression of Faith. Just to reiterate, my chosen verse was the 105th from psalm 119, "thy word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path", and I tried to express it through my project in a few different ways. First, you can see the path on top of my box surrounded by grass, represented by brown and green paper, meant to represent God's "path" or guide of how to live. I used an old pair of my shoes to show how I was trying to travel this path, as well as a set of lights to represent the second part of the verse (how God's word was a "light unto my path"). Finally, I decorated the front of the box with orange tissue paper to further emphasize a focus on light and knowledge of God. Of course, I made this project to summarize my faith statement, as it represents the verse that was the main theme of this paper.

Finally, I want to close this essay with a prayer, just as it started with. Dear God, thank you so much for the gift of faith and the ability to share it with others today. The knowledge and opportunities given to me through church experiences and scripture have been innumerable, and for that I am deeply gracious. Amen.