

Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement
For The Real World

"Happy is the man who finds wisdom, And the man who gains understanding;"—Proverbs 3:13

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Discover the Power of Forgiveness

By Larry Walker

How important is forgiveness? The greatest benefits may come from granting, not receiving, forgiveness.



A 29-YEAR-OLD POLICE OFFICER whose wife is pregnant with their first child is shot on the streets of New York. For days, his life hangs in the balance. He lives, but the shooting leaves him a quadriplegic. A young woman in Texas is brutally raped, beaten with a hammer, stabbed and left for dead. Although she survives, the incident leaves her emotionally devastated.

A 7-year-old Cleveland boy lives through the mysterious murder of his mother. His father is arrested for the crime and convicted in a sensational trial that gains national attention. Ten years later his father is freed from prison after the real murderer is located. But irreversible damage has already occurred. The boy's childhood is over, his family shattered.

The victims in these three unrelated stories have more in common than having suffered tragic, brutal crimes. All three have been able to regain control of their lives by learning *the power of forgiveness*.

Social benefits of forgiveness

An old saying reminds us, "To err is human, to forgive is divine." According to new studies, forgiveness also provides a vitally important dimension of human life, especially for those who have been victimized by life-changing tragedies.

The effect of forgiveness on social and interpersonal relationships is obvious. In marriage and families, on the job and at school, forgiveness can mend relationships torn asunder by destructive words and actions.

Forgiveness has widespread social applications. Realization of its value has led to the development of the restorative justice movement, which initiates conferences between crime victims and jailed perpetrators. More than 300 such programs are now in effect throughout the United States, including a million-dollar, religious-based juvenile justice initiative in Florida.

Holding on to bitterness, hatred and desire for revenge can cause serious emotional and physiological problems that compound the suffering of the victim.

Forgiveness and health

Recent research and examples, such as those related above, reveal that forgiveness also promotes the emotional and physical health of victims. On the other hand, holding on to bitterness, hatred and desire for revenge can cause serious emotional and physiological problems that compound the suffering of the victim. Those who nurture these powerful emotions fail to realize the damage that they are bringing on themselves. As one person put it, “Holding on to anger is like taking poison and waiting for someone else to die.”

A leader of an uprising against the Warsaw ghetto described the bitterness that remains in his heart over how he and his neighbors were treated by the Nazis: “If you could lick my heart,” he says, “it would poison you.”

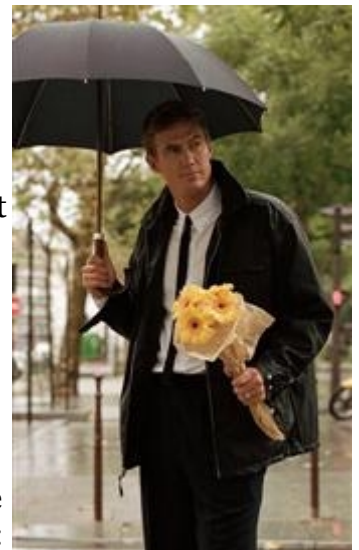
Researchers are discovering that this statement may be literally true. Social scientists are learning that forgiveness can help restore emotional and even physical wholeness to suffering victims.

Health benefits of forgiveness

Funded by a \$75,000 Templeton grant, a forgiveness laboratory has been set up at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. A *Time* magazine article reports that Dr. Charlotte van Oyen Witvliet finds “robust physiological differences” between unforgiving and forgiving responses (David Van Biema, “Should All Be Forgiven?” *Time*, Jan. 23, 2001).

“Subjects’ cardiovascular systems inevitably labor when they remember the person who hurt them. But stress is ‘significantly greater’ when they consider revenge rather than forgiveness. Witvliet suggests that we may be drawn to hold grudges ‘because that makes us feel like we are more in control and we are less sad.’ But interviews with her subjects indicate that they felt in even greater control when they tried to empathize with their offenders and enjoyed the greatest sense of power, well-being and resolution when they managed to grant forgiveness. ‘If you are willing to exert the effort it takes to be forgiving, there are benefits both emotionally and physically,’ she concludes” (ibid).

Clinical psychologist Joseph Neuman of East Tennessee State University is currently engaged in a research project seeking to learn more about the link between forgiveness and physiological health. Dr. Neuman observed: “When I treated patients with cardiovascular diseases, I was struck with



how many were bitter, angry and depressed. It clearly affected their health and their ability to heal.” His experimentation seeks to document the cardiovascular benefits of forgiveness. “Theologically speaking, forgiveness is an Act of God,” says Neuman. “In terms of health care, forgiveness could save your life.”

Forgiveness and addiction recovery

On another front, the Forgiveness for Addiction Treatment Project, also funded by the John Templeton Foundation, has established an addiction treatment program based on forgiveness. Positive results are anticipated in their treatment summary:

“It is expected that, as a result of participating in the intervention programme, clients will experience improved ability to value and accept their offender(s), which will contribute to a gradual replacement of an attitude of ill-will and malevolence with an attitude of good-will and benevolence.

“In this connection, depending on the degree of client progress, the inner experience of forgiveness can potentially be expressed behaviourally in terms of pro-social behaviour and altruistic action... We expect that victims who are successful at forgiving their perpetrators will experience relief from the cancer of bitterness (anger, anxiety and depression). This reduction in negative emotionality, should, in turn, result in a richer experience in awareness and fuller expression in behaviour of ‘Divine Grace’” (Forgiveness for Addiction Treatment Project).

The victim must be willing and able to let go of resentment whether or not the perpetrator seeks or deserves to be forgiven.

What forgiveness is not

An important part of this treatment philosophy “assumes that forgiveness... be experienced and expressed in full realization that an offender’s actions may not merit such benevolence.”

The “forgiveness” spoken of by these researchers does not depend on the attitudes or actions of the offender. Neither does it imply denying, condoning, excusing or condemning them. It doesn’t demand justice or compensation. Forgiveness is not equivalent to, nor does it require, reconciliation. The International Forgiveness Institute (IFI) explains that forgiveness is “one person’s moral response to another’s injustice. Reconciliation involves “two parties coming together in mutual respect.”



Many make the mistake of assuming that forgiveness should be extended only if the offending party apologizes and makes amends for his or her actions. But to experience the benefits of forgiveness, the victim must be willing and able to let go of resentment whether or not the perpetrator seeks or deserves to be forgiven.

Otherwise, the victim remains at the mercy of the guilty party and continues to suffer from what the program calls “the cancer of bitterness.” This can include mental and emotional turmoil and even degenerative diseases.

What forgiveness is

Clinical psychologist Everett Worthington Jr. offers this definition of forgiveness: “Forgiveness is when an individual who’s been hurt or offended decides and practices giving up his or her desire to avoid the person who hurt him or her, or giving up the desire to exact revenge on the person, and also to seek reconciliation between the two people, if it’s safe and possible” (Robert Owens Scott, “The Practice of Forgiveness,” *Spirituality & Health Newsletter*).

Many researchers offer this twofold definition: “Forgiveness is releasing the other person from retaliation and wishing the other person well” (Gary Thomas, “The Forgiveness Factor,” *Christianity Today*, Jan. 10, 2000).

The definition of forgiveness offered by the IFI involves an integrated approach of thought, emotion and behavior. “It is a response to an injustice (a moral wrong). It is a turning to the ‘good’ in the face of this wrongdoing.” Their definition also includes: “Merciful restraint from pursuing resentment or revenge, generosity or offering good things such as attention, time, or remembrances on holidays. Moral love or contributing to the betterment of the other. It is the foregoing of resentment or revenge when the wrongdoer’s actions deserve it and giving the gifts of mercy, generosity and love when the wrongdoer does not deserve them” (IFI).

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In short, forgiveness is an unconditional gift to someone who may not deserve it.

Forgiveness in the Bible

What these men have articulated is stated simply and eloquently in many passages of Scripture. In the Sermon on the Mount, the cornerstone of Christian teaching, Jesus tells us to “love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

The apostle Paul advises: “Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask him to bless them and not to curse them... Don’t mistreat someone who has mistreated you... Don’t try to get even... If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Don’t let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good” (Romans 12:14, 17, 20-21, Contemporary English Version).

These admonitions undoubtedly appear unwise, unwarranted and unfair to a non-Christian. Even Christians have viewed this in terms of a unilateral obligation. Lewis Schmedes observed that “human forgiveness had been seen as a religious obligation of love that we owe to a person who has offended us. The discovery I made was the important benefit that forgiveness is to the forgiver.” Schmedes believes that “untold pain is brought about in the world by people’s unwillingness to forgive and the corresponding passion to get even” (Thomas).

Forgiveness is not easy. But it is the best way for all concerned. By letting go of hostile, vengeful feelings and leaving it up to God to deal with wrongdoers who have hurt us, we can move beyond our hurt to live happy, healthy lives.

The greatest example of forgiveness

Forgiveness is also at the core of the gospel. If you have difficulty forgiving someone, consider the debt of sin that God has forgiven you of when you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.

In Matthew 18 Jesus tells us how to deal with someone who “sins against you.” He enumerates a three-step conflict resolution process followed by forgiveness.

Headstrong Peter apparently found difficulty with the concept of forgiveness. He asked, “How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). Peter probably reasoned that he could grit his teeth and utter words of professed forgiveness seven times if he knew that after the eighth incident, he could take actions to get even. But Jesus told him that forgiveness must not only be *unlimited*, it must also be *from the heart*.

To put the matter into a spiritual perspective, Jesus told a story of a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One of his servants who owed a great sum of money pleaded with the king for mercy. The master was moved with compassion and forgave him the entire debt. But the forgiven servant then demanded immediate repayment from a fellow servant who owed him a very small sum of money. The debtor was unable to repay and begged him for mercy.

“Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?”

Instead of extending the mercy he had received for a much larger debt, the unforgiving servant had the other thrown into prison. When the king found out, he was furious. “You wicked servant!” said the king. “I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?” The king then rescinded his original forgiveness and demanded full payment from the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23-34).

Jesus concludes the parable with the warning, “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (verse 35).

God’s perspective on forgiveness

This parable helps us understand how important God considers forgiveness. The point is not whether the other person is worthy. Forgiveness is a fundamental quality of godly love that seeks the ultimate good of everyone.

The International Forgiveness Institute’s definition further explains forgiveness as going beyond the call of duty by “overcoming of wrongdoing with good” to offer “a freely chosen gift (rather than a grim obligation).” The definition correctly promises, “As we give the gift of forgiveness we ourselves are healed.”

Forgiveness is fundamental to healing—physically, emotionally and spiritually. Jesus, the Master Healer, offered His life for the forgiveness of all the sins of all mankind forever. He set the perfect

example of forgiveness to His dying breath. Never did He seek vengeance, in word or in deed (1 Peter 2:20-25). Instead He prayed regarding those who crucified Him, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus knew that most people do not realize the full consequences of evil. He also understood the evil potential of the human heart that yields to hostile, vengeful emotions (Mark 7:20-23). He wanted no part of the damage resulting from such emotions for Himself, His followers or anyone else.

As the *Christianity Today* article concludes, “For international, national, and even personal issues, researchers are finding that a practice taught by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago may be our most effective tool and response” (Thomas).

To make sure we remember the importance of forgiveness, Jesus instituted a most meaningful ceremony to commemorate His death for our sins. When we follow His instructions and partake of the symbols of the bread and the wine (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), we should remember the magnitude of God’s forgiveness and seek to practice forgiveness in every aspect of our personal lives.

Let us learn, practice and benefit from the power of forgiveness.

Recommended reading

We invite you to read our booklet [*Why Does God Allow Suffering?*](#)

I Know Where I'm Going

By Amy Stephens

When we come to see God's involvement in our lives, we can be encouraged that when things don't work out the way we planned, it's only because God has a better plan.



THIS IS A THOUGHT that most of us can relate to. I have heard it depicted in numerous songs, poems and e-mails. It is this:

I am not where I thought I would be.

I certainly am not where I was.

However, I know where I am going and I will follow God's lead to get there.

It brings overwhelming peace when we truly accept God's will in our lives. It is the ability to realize, when we look at where we are, analyze the dreams we had, the plans we made, that we could have done better. However, God knew this and blessed us accordingly! It is the reflective moment we have when we realize how far we have come, how we have grown, how different we are. It is the confidence we have when we realize that God's plan for us is an extraordinary display of His love, mercy and faithfulness.

God's direction

Sometimes we think we know what direction to take, and we even dream about reaching our goal. Though it may be a perfectly acceptable and proper goal, what we may not realize is that God may have something else in mind. When your dream is not becoming reality, it may not be apparent

that God has something better in store. This could be very discouraging. However, if we wait patiently on God and trust Him, we will realize that He always has our best interests at heart.

We think, we plan, we schedule and we write down goals and dates in our day planners. But if we leave God out of the plans, we risk missing the best God has for us. It is only when we ask God to be a part of our decisions and our daily activities that God can bless us.

In James 4:13-16, we are reminded to always seek God's will in our lives: "Look here, you people who say, 'Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.' How do you know what will happen tomorrow? For your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.' Otherwise you will be boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil" (New Living Translation).



Sometimes, it can appear as if God isn't directing us at all; or if He is, the compass must be broken, because we keep getting lost or deeper into troubles. It is during these times—when it is the hardest to keep God's will as the priority in our lives—that it helps to remember that sometimes God may be proving a point. Maybe the point is being made for our benefit, maybe for someone close to us, for a perfect stranger or for Satan.

It is when our walk is not perfectly smooth and when we stumble that we learn to rely on God. When we trust God no matter what, we are telling Satan, I know your influence and your ways and I choose God. When we fall and we reach for God's hand, spiritually we are telling Satan and the world, I know who my Provider is, who my Helper is, who loves me.

God's love

Most of us were headed down a dangerous path. It may have been a worldly, self-centered path that follows the world's idea of prosperity and success. Or it may have been a confused path where peace of mind was an illusion and escaping or hiding was the only option or a destructive path that was filled with anger, resentment and hostility.

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God gave us His Holy Spirit to help us understand His map, the Bible, so that we can find His path, so that we can have direction in our lives. Through God's love and mercy, we can come to Him when we are lost, when we don't listen to His direction or when we go against His ways and He will lead us back so that we can feel His love, His gentle guiding.

God's plan

There is a sense of empowerment when you know where you are going. Just ask anyone who has ever been lost! When you know the way, you walk with a sense of purpose. Your actions have

purpose. You are driven to reach the destination. Are we living our lives as if we know where we are going?



When we go about our daily lives, are we aware of what our Savior and Elder Brother told us in John 14:2-3: “ In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (New International Version)?

Jesus didn’t say, “Yes, there are a lot of rooms there and you can stay in one.” He went to prepare a place for us, a position in His Kingdom. When a couple is expecting a baby or adopting a child, think about the care and time they put into preparing for the new family member, setting up a room, gathering the things the child will need, buying things to care for and entertain the child. Our Brother and Father are doing the same thing for us right now. Not only is He preparing for us, but He is designing our crown, determining what role we will have in God’s Kingdom. Based upon our choices in this life, our crown awaits us.

You may not know what is around the corner, but you can have assurance that if God is telling you to turn that corner, He will also be there to help you face whatever is waiting. Remember Deuteronomy 31:6: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you” (NIV).

Things might not have worked out the way we thought they would, and we might not be in the same place we were. But we can know where we are going and how we will get there—and that should encourage us to keep going and follow God’s lead.

Recommended reading:

To learn more about trusting and following God, read our free booklet [*You Can Have Living Faith.*](#)

Armstrong's Right... It's Not About the Bike

By Aimee Zahora

Experiencing a long, demanding bike race—and the training that led up to it—brings to mind the training and commitment we must make to life!



LANCE ARMSTRONG WROTE A BOOK called *It's Not About the Bike*, where he detailed his struggle with cancer and recovery from it. He's a survivor of testicular cancer. Seven-time consecutive winner of the Tour de France, one of the most grueling annual cycling races ever, Armstrong tells a story that is both compelling and inspirational. The book will touch your heart; it's about life and choosing to live.

100 miles—10 hours

Last year I had an opportunity to discover the fulfillment that comes with cycling. On September 25, 2005, I rode 100 miles in the Apple Cider Century, which took place in Three Oaks, Michigan. The first 45 miles were sunny with beautiful, tranquil scenery to enjoy—including apple orchards, vast stretches of farmland, vineyards that filled the air with the sweet aroma of Welch's grape juice and breathtaking waterfront properties along Lake Michigan. The remaining 55 miles it rained—not a pelting rain, but not a drizzle or a sprinkle either—more like a steady, consistent good-for-the-grass rain.



Successfully riding 100 miles in one day on a bicycle brought about a tremendous feeling of accomplishment. After all, sitting on a bike, pedaling for 10 hours is not exactly comfortable. Everything ends up sore.

But, it's not about being sore and, as Lance Armstrong wrote, "it's not about the bike."

What's important about the experience is what led up to the day of the ride. I committed to the Century ride when I bought my bike in April and registered for the event. Six months of training—with a plan to focus on frequency of riding, distance and speed—required dedication and perseverance.

It's about living

Cycling is a rewarding sport—it affords quality "think time" and an opportunity to enjoy God's creation, while releasing stress and tension. But as beneficial as it is, it's really not about the bike. It's about living. There is a much greater reward in living God's way of life.



There's a parallel spiritual analogy to consider, because God's way of life, too, requires training, dedication and perseverance. We commit our lives to God at baptism. As we strive to be more like Jesus Christ, we must train our minds to think like Him by spending a great deal of time studying the Bible, communicating with Him through prayer, fasting, and fellowshiping with like minds.

Having a plan for becoming more like Christ keeps us focused when we become distracted, tired and discouraged. When we persevere through trials, we demonstrate our dedication to Christianity. Not only are we strengthened physically and mentally, but we also receive blessings of peace of mind and contentment.

No, it's not about the bike. It's about Deuteronomy 30:19, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers" (Revised Standard Version).

It means choosing life.

Recommended reading

For further information on living God's way of life, read our booklet [Making Life Work](#).

How “Fair Dinkum” Are You?

By Anne Burchard

Why do you do the things you do? Why do you say the things you say? Are you hiding behind a facade of fears and false values? How real are you?



IN AUSTRALIA, if someone referred to you as being *fair dinkum*, they would be paying you a great compliment. Businesses advertise their products as being *fair dinkum*, while others guarantee *fair dinkum* bargains and services.

An article printed on the www.WorldWideWords.org Web site said *fair dinkum* was possibly an English dialect word brought to Australia by settlers. It originally meant work, but was later extended to a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. Finally, it was translated to mean honest, genuine and reliable. So being considered *fair dinkum* implies that a person is regarded as authentic and trustworthy.

Everyone expects honesty in our dealings and relationships. Yet most of us have been misled and hurt by others lying to us at some time. Every day we hear about broken promises, corporate collapses, cheating and examples of businesses “cutting corners.”

Jim Clemmer of *The Clemmer Management Group*, states in his Web page on practical leadership that honesty and integrity are key ingredients in developing trust. Trust is a key element in establishing credibility. Our credibility is at the center of our ability to influence others.

How fair dinkum are you?

Honesty can be somewhat of a paradox. It is a quality rated above hard work, self-confidence and punctuality, but when people hear a truth that doesn't match their opinion, they don't like it. Then it becomes criticized and berated.

Of course, you and I have never spoken an untruth, have we? To say so is to deny our facing the truth about everyday issues like our jobs, relationships, status or our individual inadequacies.

While the world condemns dishonesty in those we expect to trust, we pay little heed to the impact of our own falsehoods on ourselves and others.

Why do you do the things you do? Why do you say the things you say? Are you as fair dinkum as you think you are? Maybe you're hiding behind a facade of fears and false values? How real are you?



The truth about lies

There are two classes of people: those running after something and those running away from something. The latter are fugitives from real or imagined fears.

People lie for many reasons. Their failure to face up to the truth generally stems from fear. For example, some are afraid to level with family and friends about something negative for fear of hurting their feelings and being rejected. Employees refrain from pointing out errors to the boss for fear of being fired. Young people indulge in questionable behavior for fear of not being accepted by their peers. In many cases, people will lie to simply protect themselves from embarrassment, punishment and, in extreme cases, even losing their lives.



The Bible tells us Satan told the first lie. He deceived Eve when he told her she would not die if she ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:4); while God had told Adam and his wife that if they did, they would die (verse 3).

Satan continues to deceive the whole world today (Revelation 12:9) by blinding man's mind to God's truth.

God's Word records for us examples of lying, deceit and murder by individuals in moments of weakness. In Genesis 12:13 and 20:11, Abraham reasoned that by telling Pharaoh and king Abimelech a half-truth about Sarah being his sister instead of his wife, he could save his life.

King David, in order to cover up his adultery with Bathsheba, resorted to deceit and conspired to murder her husband Uriah on

the battlefield (2 Samuel 11).

Lying about how much money they gave to the Church cost Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, their lives (Acts 5:1-10).

Man's ways, which seem so right to him, lead to many of the world's problems and eventually end in death (Proverbs 14:12).

All of us have been disappointed with ourselves when we told an untruth or avoided facing up to error. We remember the guilty feeling and the fear of being found out.

An article by M.C. Orman, titled "The Benefits of Telling the Truth," included some of the consequences of *not* telling the truth. They include frequent failures in life, being distrusted by others, lack of self-esteem and confidence, dysfunctional relationships and the inability to be self-correcting.

There are two classes of people: those running after something and those running away from something.

Being honest defines who we are. Are you happy with your standard of integrity? You can remove the barriers hiding the real you and open the way to deeper truths in your life.

For those who think on godly principles, the answers can be found in the Bible because God's Word is truth (John 17:17).

Christian faith demands greater honesty

Man's destiny to become part of God's eternal family requires us to see how our thoughts and ways are inferior to God's (Isaiah 55:9) and change them. To do so, we must sincerely allow the truth of God's Word to cut through our natural resistance to His way (Hebrews 4:12).

King David, in his repentant prayer to God (Psalm 51:6), understood it was not only his obvious sins that condemned him, but the hidden intents of his heart and thoughts.

God has bound Himself to telling the truth (Titus 1:2), and it is His earnest desire that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). Why? He knows that those who live faithfully, according to His Word, will be set free from the penalty of sin—which is death. They will also receive the promise of eternal life.

Real Christians love the truth. They know they can rely on God's Word because it is the truth.

In answering Pilate, Christ told him the reason He came into the world was to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37). True followers of Jesus understand that their faith in Him demands greater honesty in their daily lives.

Real Christians love the truth. They know they can rely on God's Word because it is the truth. Christ promised to give them the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of truth—to help them change their ways to God's (John 16:13).

Hebrews 11 records, for our encouragement and inspiration, the examples of many who submitted themselves totally to God. They did so because they found God to be absolutely trustworthy. Their faith in His promises enabled them to endure cruel trials and tests, even to the point of torture and death. Others witnessed miracles and mighty interventions in their lives.

Honesty in our day-to-day relationships and our dealings with others enables us to self-correct when faced with higher spiritual truths. God longs for us to face up to our spiritual shortcomings so we can overcome them. We can show Him how fair dinkum we are by our willingness to repent of our ways and accept God's way of righteousness. By doing so, we become more like Him.

Recommended reading

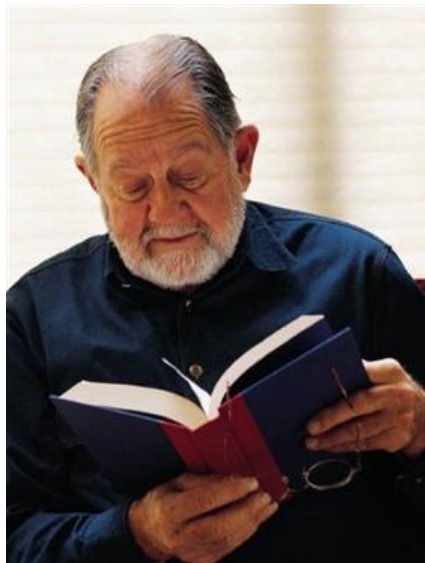
What reassurance it is to know God cannot tell a lie. We can trust Him completely when He says He wants all men to be saved. However, in order to be saved, man must repent of wrongdoing and embrace God's way of truth.

To learn more how these changes can be achieved, read our free booklet [*Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion.*](#)

Read the Book

By Scott Ashley

Advertising executive and author Bruce Barton called it The Book Nobody Knows. No other book is more important to you and your future.



BRIDES CARRY IT AT THEIR WEDDINGS. Presidents and judges place their hands on it when they are sworn into office. In legal proceedings, witnesses put one hand on it while they swear to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

In many hotel and motel rooms it can be found on the desk or nightstand. Most homes have at least one, and often it occupies a place of honor on the mantle, coffee table or nightstand where it gives the impression that it's used daily.

If it were listed by booksellers, it would perpetually make the bestseller lists, with millions of copies sold and given away year after year. It's been translated into more than 2,000 languages and dialects.

This book is, of course, the Bible.

But, popular though it is, how many people actually take the time to read it?

Last year a survey by the Barna Research Group, a religious research firm, found that only one in three Americans read the Bible regularly or could name the writers of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Not even half of those surveyed could name even five of the Ten Commandments. Most indicated that they find the Bible irrelevant.

Only one in three Americans read the Bible regularly or could name the writers of the four Gospels.

Although Bible sales are surging among some publishers, and dozens of varying versions and translations line the shelves at religious and secular bookstores alike, it appears that relatively few take the time to actually read the Scriptures. And, regrettably, even fewer understand them.

What a remarkable turnaround from earlier years!

Bible-believing leaders

Not long ago Ronald Reagan, U.S. president from 1981-1989, said: "Within the covers of the Bible are all the answers for all the problems men face. The Bible can touch hearts, order minds, and refresh souls."

Only a generation ago Dwight D. Eisenhower, president from 1953-61, extolled the Scriptures with these words: "The Bible is endorsed by the ages. Our civilization is built upon its words. In no other Book is there such a collection of inspired wisdom, realty [fidelity and honesty] and hope."



The legendary British statesman Winston Churchill firmly believed in the accuracy and integrity of the Bible. "We reject with scorn all these learned and labored myths that Moses was but a legendary figure," he wrote. "We believe that the most scientific view, the most up-to-date and rationalistic conception, will find its fullest satisfaction in taking the Bible story literally."

Many other great leaders have likewise believed in and tried to order their lives according to the Bible's instructions.

Queen Victoria, monarch of Great Britain at the height of its power, exclaimed, "That book [the Bible] accounts for the supremacy of England!"

Abraham Lincoln, who led the United States through the Civil War as its 16th president, perhaps summed it up best when he said: “I believe that the Bible is the best gift God has ever given to man.”

George Washington, Revolutionary War commander and first president of the United States, said: “It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.”

Substance or show?

What about you? How much attention do you pay to the Bible?

Of the world’s 6 billion inhabitants, about a third *claim* to be followers of the Bible. But how many follow Jesus Christ’s advice to *read the Book* (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31; Mark 2:25; 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3)?

Notice how God views those who outwardly adhere to His words but neglect to live by them: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, *but their hearts are far from me*. Their worship of me is made up *only of rules taught by men*” (Isaiah 29:13, New International Version, emphasis added throughout).

God is neither impressed nor pleased with empty outward appearances of religion. He is pleased, though, with those who deeply respect His Word: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (Isaiah 66:2, NIV).

The choice is up to you

How does God view our choice of whether or not to live by His Word?

When He revealed His instructions to ancient Israel, formerly a slave people in Egypt, His desire was for them to become a model nation to the other nations around them. Through His servant Moses, God told them: “See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’... What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?” (Deuteronomy 4:5-8, NIV).

God is neither impressed nor pleased with empty outward appearances of religion. He is pleased, though, with those who deeply respect His Word.

God intends that His way of life be a shining example to others. When we live by them, His laws are to be a model of wisdom and understanding to those around us. Jesus Christ Himself made it clear that we are to live not by physical food alone, “but by every word of God” (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3).

But it is up to us whether we will take the initiative to study and live by those words. When God revealed His instruction to Israel, He also set before them a choice: “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to

walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you...

“But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, ...I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; ...I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:15-19).

Simply put, God promises great blessings for those willing to study His Word and put it into practice. Failing to live by it will bring its own punishments in the sorrow and suffering that inevitably follows breaking God’s laws.

More reasons to read the Book

Besides these reasons straight from our Creator, there are many other reasons why we should read the Book:

- It is claimed as the basis for Western civilization and Judeo-Christian culture and society.
- It is a unique historical document spanning some 4,000 years of history.
- It is a remarkable literary work, studied in thousands of college and university classes for its literary value alone.
- It offers straightforward, practical advice on all aspects of life.
- It is a consistent bestseller year after year after year.

The early American patriot Patrick Henry, famous for his stirring cry of “Give me liberty or give me death!” also said that “The Bible is worth all other books which have ever been printed.”

Where to begin

If by now you see the value in discovering the treasures of the Bible for yourself, you may be wondering where to begin. The answer is to start at the beginning, with the first chapter of Genesis.

Some Bibles contain only what is called the New Testament, plus perhaps Psalms and Proverbs. By omitting the Old Testament, such Bibles are missing about three quarters of the material God inspired to be written down and preserved through the ages for us.

God promises great blessings for those willing to study His Word and put it into practice.

Be sure you have a Bible that contains both the Old and New Testaments. After all, the Old Testament writings were the “Holy Scriptures” to which the apostle Paul referred when he wrote to Timothy: “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The writers of the New Testament understood the Hebrew Scriptures to be inspired by God. They included some 300 quotations from the Old Testament and hundreds of allusions to it in their writings.

Read and learn

If you spend only 10 to 15 minutes a day in reading the Bible, you can read the entire Bible through in about a year. Initially you need not be so concerned with studying the Bible or solving problems so much as simply reading through it.

As you read, you'll discover many fascinating stories involving history, romance, danger, violence, intrigue and even prophecy. You'll quickly encounter men and women like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, Joseph, Moses, Miriam, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Jesus, Peter and Paul. Their stories were written down as examples for us, preserved that we might learn from their many and varied experiences (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:6-11).



And the Bible explains things as they really are—the good, the bad and the ugly. It presents a clear picture of human failings and gives the solutions.

If some passages are unclear, you may want to compare one or more Bible versions to clear things up. Used bookstores are a good place to find inexpensive Bible translations. (To understand the differences in approach among various translations, be sure to read your free copy of our booklet [How to Understand the Bible](#).)

Try to read with an open mind and fresh approach, as though you were reading every scripture for the first time. You may be surprised at what you'll discover. Some scriptures, for example, may directly contradict what you may have always believed the Bible said. You must be sure to rely on what the Bible itself says, not what someone *says* it says.

Questions may come to mind as you read along. Jot them down as you read. Feel free to write us with any questions you may have. In many cases your question will be covered in detail in one of our booklets or in articles in our sister publication, [The Good News](#). Or you may find the answer later as you read further.

Take the first step

If you apply its words, reading the Bible can be the most rewarding thing you could ever do. Woodrow Wilson, U.S. president from 1913 to 1921, compared his success to the application of God's Word. "There are a good many problems before the American people today, and before me as President, but I expect to find the solution of those problems just in the proportion that I am faithful in the study of the Word of God." No doubt, much of the success of "the American experience" can be attributed to its leaders' familiarity with God's Word.

As you read, you'll discover many fascinating stories involving history, romance, danger, violence, intrigue and even prophecy.

By studying the Bible, you'll gain wonderful and marvelous insights into your relationships with family, friends and others. You'll far better understand why our world is in the condition it's in. You'll come to understand yourself far better than you ever have before.

The Bible records a lasting compliment to those of Berea who, on hearing the apostle Paul's teaching, "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). They wanted to be sure what they were being taught was really what the Scriptures said. They set a commendable example for us.

How about you? Where do you fit in? Do you "search the Scriptures" to discover whether the words written there are true? If you do, you can share the joy of discovery experienced by King David, who wrote this praise of God and His eternal Word: "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies . . . I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Your precepts. I have restrained my feet from every evil way, that I may keep Your word. I have not departed from Your judgments, for You Yourself have taught me. How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalm 119:97-103).

Recommended reading

Where should you begin in your study of the Bible? How should you approach it? United Church of God, the publisher of *VCM* has put together several publications to help you discover and better understand what the Bible says. We first recommend that you read [Is the Bible True?](#) This free booklet examines the Bible from several perspectives—science, astronomy, history, archaeology and prophecy—showing that the Bible is indeed true and trustworthy.

Also, be sure to request our free booklet [How to Understand the Bible](#). This helpful guide shows you seven keys that will help you increase your understanding of God's Word. It will also help you understand basic biblical themes.

Please also request to enroll in our free [Bible Study Course](#). The first two lessons are titled *Why the Bible Is the Word of God* and *The Word of God: The Foundation of Knowledge*. The remaining 10 lessons will take you through the major themes of the Bible, addressing such crucial topics as God's plan for humankind, your ultimate destiny, why God allows suffering and how and why He will intervene in human affairs to change this world forever.

"It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible."—
George Washington

Recommended reading

If you would like to learn more about what the Bible teaches on these subjects, be sure to request your free copies of the booklets [What Happens After Death?](#) and [Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest](#).

What Does the Bible Really Say?

The Bible Does Say:

- “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20).
- “No one has ascended to heaven” (John 3:13).
- Both Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul customarily taught on the Sabbath day (Luke 4:16; Acts 17:2).
- Jesus Christ is “Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28).
- The fate of the wicked is to be burned to ashes (Malachi 4:3).
- Under the New Covenant, God will write His law in human hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:10).

The Bible Does Not Say:

- Man has or is an immortal soul (the words “immortal soul” appear together nowhere in the Bible).
- Heaven is the reward of the saved.
- The Sabbath day is abolished or Christians should now regard Sunday as the Sabbath.
- Sunday is “the Lord’s day.”
- God will punish the wicked forever in an ever-burning hellfire.
- God’s law is abolished or annulled under the New Covenant.

Letters to the Editor

Send to India?

Dear brother and sister, Greetings from God's Grace Ministries, India. I am very happy to write these few lines for your condescending attention. If possible, please send your magazine to my ministry address. Or if there is any procedure to receive your magazine to my ministry in India, how can I receive your magazine? Is there any money to be paid?

Looking for your response

— Pastor P. Prakasa Rao

Thank you so much for your inquiry and interest in our magazine, but Virtual Christian Magazine is an Internet based magazine only. We do however offer The Good News Magazine, which can be sent to you free of charge and has many of the same type of articles.

If you are interested in this, please send your mailing address along with your request to: info@ucg.org.

“Great magazine!”

I just want to say, Great magazine, really AWESOME!

“Foul Language”

Thanks for writing your article [“Foul Language.”](#) There have been very few articles about this in the 40 some years that I have been in the church. You are certainly right in the fact there was a lot less foul language when we were young (I am 62).

Of course, the degree depended upon the household and community we lived in. One of the major reasons was that, back when we were young, the Judeo-Christian churches influenced the whole society. Today society influences the churches.

As a child, my mother would wash our mouths out with soap if we tried to use dirty words—even though my dad used a few of them. (I did the same with my children.)

We are also living in the time of the gentiles, in a day when non-Christians have moved into our country and do not have the moral values of the Ten Commandments.

It emotionally “hurts” my ears to hear bad language. Thanks again for your article.

— J.H.

Some feedback messages are edited for space and/or clarity