

# eternal perspectives

with author Randy Alcorn

Spring Issue • 2013

## Shedding Light on Depression and Thoughts of Suicide

That Awkward Moment  
When We Speak the Gospel

How God Uses Stress for  
Our Good and His Glory

Seeing Yourself  
as a Disciple

plus

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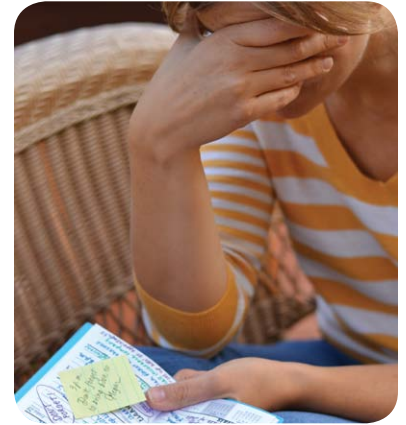
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## about

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## What should our perspective be about taxes?

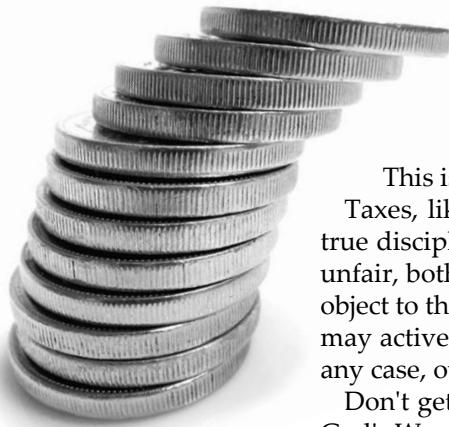
Sometimes Christians get sidetracked from their central mission as God's stewards through illegitimate or secondary financial concerns. In my opinion, one example is the tax protest movement that now includes thousands of Christians across the country, many of whom use their church contacts to propagate their cause. Usually, they refuse to pay income tax, citing innumerable reasons why taxes are unjust and unconstitutional. They do this despite the fact that in a much more unjust society, Paul commanded the Roman Christians to obey their government and pay their taxes (Romans 13:1-7).

When asked about the tax to be paid to Caesar, Jesus turned the focus to something more important (Mark 12:13-17). The issue of paying taxes to Caesar is insignificant compared to a person's need to surrender his or her whole life to God. Jesus says the tax is to be paid, but he emphasizes there are much higher things with which we should concern ourselves. (I know there are many sincere tax protesters.

This is honest disagreement.)

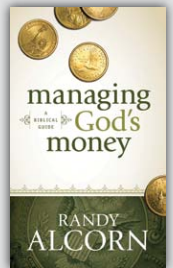
Taxes, like a thousand other subjects, are secondary issues to the true disciple. Although some taxation is certainly unreasonable and unfair, both Jesus and Paul said that paying taxes is a duty. We may object to the system, we may support legislation to change it, and we may actively lobby for tax relief, but we are still to pay our taxes. In any case, our concerns about unfairness must not become our focus.

Don't get me wrong—there is a place for civil disobedience when God's Word and protecting human life is at stake. That's a subject for another day. ■



more

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Download the free *Managing God's Money* study guide at [www.epm.org/mgmstudy](http://www.epm.org/mgmstudy)

Stewardship isn't a narrow subcategory of the Christian life.  
On the contrary, stewardship *is* the Christian life.

—RANDY ALCORN

## What's one thing people may not know about you?

Chuck Norris once put a choke hold on me. While a pastor I went to jail for peaceful civil disobedience. I was sued by the ACLU for praying at City Hall. I love underwater photography, some of my favorite subjects being sharks. I sometimes pray with my face buried in the coat of my Golden Retriever.

Okay, let's go with this: in 1985, I was diagnosed with insulin-dependent diabetes. God has used this disease powerfully in my life. I have a built-in reminder every single day when I take blood tests and insulin injections: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5b). Of all the months in my life when I could have gotten a serious disease it happened during the month when my first book was published. That was a reminder of something I've never forgotten: my life and writing isn't about me, it's about Jesus. And without his empowerment I can't accomplish anything that matters. ■



# That Awkward Moment When We Speak the Gospel

BY KEN CURRIE

**E**vangelism is counter-cultural. It's true everywhere on the planet, but perhaps it's especially so in our increasingly post-Christian Western society. We live in a polite culture, for the most part. Talk about religion? You just don't go there. Talk about how many tornadoes have come through, and how the team is doing, and how the city has new recycling bins. But Jesus Christ, crucified for sinners and risen from the dead? You just don't go there. So they say.

For the time being, it seems the greatest threat to gospel-telling in such a society is not that we will be hauled before the city council, beaten, and have our property taken away. What we are really dealing with is some awkwardness.

Awkwardness is perhaps the biggest threat to evangelism for far too many of us.

## Awkwardness Never Killed Anyone

I've done a little research and can confirm to you that there is not one documented case of someone dying, or even being severely injured, by awkwardness. Not one.

But when I read my kids' Twitter, I see nearly half their tweets starting with "That awkward moment when... ." Awkwardness is catastrophic, and maybe especially so among the younger generation.

Awkwardness! It's as if we imagine fire and asteroids and dragons. As if people are running through the streets yelling, "Run from the awkwardness, it's going to get you! You might feel awkward. It would be terrible if you felt awkward!"

But a little awkwardness—or even a lot of it—is such a small price to pay for enjoying the power of God's Spirit using us to be his witnesses.

## Joy in Small Suffering

I write this as no super-evangelist. I'm right there with you, naturally fearful that things might be awkward. I sit on the plane thinking, "If the guy next to me doesn't like my talking about Jesus, it's going to be awkward." Oh, no, I'll have a hard life to deal with sitting next to this guy for two whole hours being awkward.

For the Christian, there is a joy and a privilege to suffer for Jesus, even a tiny little bit. Most of us can agree that when we do step out in faith, the awkwardness really wasn't that bad in retrospect. Awkwardness seems so horrible when it's in front of us. But it's not nearly as bad behind us. All my limbs are together, I'm okay, it's really not that bad.

## You Are Involved

The aim here is not to press any kind of guilt on you. But I think when we look at this issue of gospel witness, we have a tendency to do what they do in big cities when somebody is laying on the ground. Everyone walks past the victim like they didn't notice anything. Then the cops come around the corner and wonder why nobody responded. It was because nobody wanted to get involved.

Well, if you are a born-again believer, you are involved—really, really involved. The Holy Spirit lives in your heart. You cannot be more involved. You're in the middle of it. It's happening right there in you. You are the issue, you are the scene of the crime. You're involved. We cannot dance out of the way.

## Why So Difficult?

Why would God make something that we long to do so difficult to do?

For some Christians, it isn't that difficult to evangelize. In fact, these tend to be confused as to why so few Christians are involved in ongoing, bold evangelism. If this is you, I want to tell you, we praise God for your boldness. And you should know, you are a bit weird. For you, awkwardness is just an abstract concept. For the rest of us, awkwardness is like a plague to be avoided at all costs. But this is an example of the different parts in the body of Christ making their specific contribution to God's glory and the advance of his kingdom. So why is something so important and integral to the Christian life so difficult for so many?

Here's one answer: God gives most of us this awareness of awkwardness so that we would never, not for a second, trust in or magnify ourselves and drift away from the magnificence of the gospel. This awareness in evangelism makes the gospel tangible. It means I need the gospel right now myself. Not only does my hearer need Jesus at this moment, but so do I!

Jesus died for disciples who do a poor job of witnessing. He died for those of us who have all too often failed to commend him because we feared it might get awkward. But he also died to give us the grace to press through the awkwardness to testify to him.

May God give us the grace to rebound from our many failures and grace not to fold in the face of awkwardness in telling others the most important news in the world. ■



**Ken Currie** is the director of Campus Outreach Minneapolis and the lead pastor for outreach at Bethlehem Baptist Church. Ken and his wife Theresa have five children. This article originally appeared on [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org) and is used by permission of the author.

## EPM's 2012 Ministry Overview

We're excited about the ways God faithfully used our ministry in the past year to impact eternity. Did you know that in 2012, Eternal Perspective Ministries:

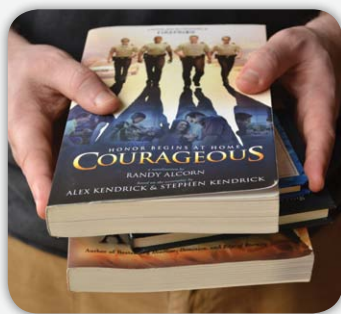
- gave away 49,552 books to organizations and individuals for ministry needs?
- distributed \$318,389 from book royalties to other worthy organizations?
- funded the translation of Randy's book *Why Pro-life?* into French, Albanian, and Bosnian, to help reach people worldwide with the truth about the unborn?

View our ministry overview letter online at [www.epm.org/2012overview](http://www.epm.org/2012overview)



### Randy's books for prisoners: exploding growth in 2012

It's our privilege to have given away thousands of Randy's books in 2012 to prisoners and chapel libraries in 224 different institutions. These materials minister to a wide range of inmates, from those who are serving sentences for drug-related crimes to those who are on death row. The books are often shared with other inmates, so one book may be read by several people. EPM responds to every prisoner letter we receive—500 or more each month!

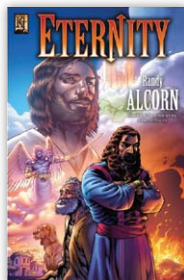


#### Interested in helping send Randy's books to prisoners?

You can give directly to "Books for Prisoners" as one of our special funds at [www.epm.org/donate](http://www.epm.org/donate).

### Eternity graphic novel coming summer 2013

The *Eternity* graphic novel (long, bound comic book style), a fictional depiction of Christ's story of the rich man and Lazarus, has an expected release date of June 2013 and can be preordered at [www.epm.org/eternity](http://www.epm.org/eternity). Randy writes, "I am just thrilled with the art, and I'm praying that the quality will draw people into the book to see and hear the gospel of Christ."



### Randy on Focus on the Family radio

On April 8-9, Focus on the Family radio will air Randy's interview on Heaven, and on June 6-7, they will air his interview on stewardship and giving. (Please note the broadcast schedule is subject to change.) You can listen online, or find a station and an air time, at [www.focusonthefamily.com/radio](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/radio).

### Christian Alliance for Orphans

Randy will be speaking at the Christian Alliance for Orphans annual Summit on May 2-3 in Nashville, Tennessee. For information or to register go to [www.summit9.org/register](http://www.summit9.org/register).

### Randy and Nanci sharing at Mom to Mom

Randy and Nanci will share at Mom to Mom (a ministry of their home church, Good Shepherd Community Church in Boring, Oregon) on Thursday, May 9 from 9 to 11:15 a.m. The topic is "Help for Women Under Stress." Learn more at [www.goodshepherdcc.org/women](http://www.goodshepherdcc.org/women).

Go to [www.epm.org/m2m2012](http://www.epm.org/m2m2012) or scan the QR code to watch Randy and Nanci sharing at Mom to Mom in 2012 on the topic of "Guarding the Environment of your Home."



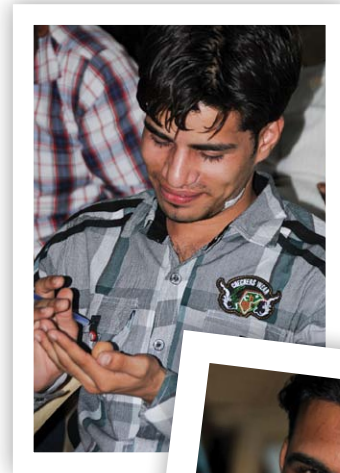
## impact: book royalties

One hundred percent of the royalties from Randy's books are given to worthy Christian organizations (to date, over \$6 million). We'd like to share with you just one of the ways the royalties have been used to make a difference in the world—and for eternity.

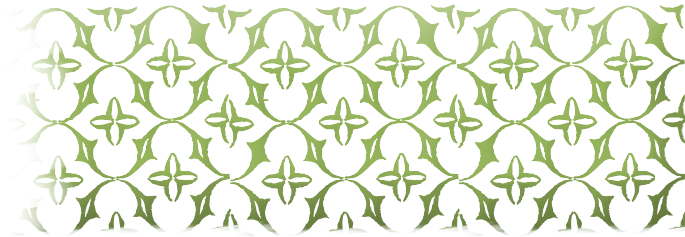
### LIFE International: Pro-life Education in India

LIFE International ([www.lifeinternational.com](http://www.lifeinternational.com)) is a ministry that works worldwide to reach men and women impacted by abortion with the gospel of Jesus Christ and the truth about the unborn. Earlier this year, Kurt Dillinger, the president of Life International, shared how pastors in India were moved by learning about the humanity of children in the womb:

During the session on fetal development we handed out the twelve week fetus models. It was quiet. Many just sat and stared at the little human form. ...Then we went into the session on abortion techniques. Every eye was glued to the presentation because all of the pastors believed that whatever is in the womb is not human until five months. When the session was concluded, there were many pastors wiping their eyes. This culture does not show emotion this way but they could not hold it back. ...During the next session we repented as pastors for our involvement, our silence and for sending our loved ones for abortions. A vow was made this day not to allow this behavior to continue.



# My Journey as a Christian Writer



by Randy Alcorn

In 1970, when I was sixteen and a new Christian, friends invited me to an evening class on the Gospel of John taught by John G. Mitchell, one of Multnomah School of the Bible's founders. I became hooked on Bible study and knew my future was at Multnomah.

I completed my bachelor's work in 1975, married my favorite Multnomah student, Nanci, and soon entered the school's new master's program. One of my favorite theology professors, Dr. Joseph Wong, scratched on a term paper: "You should consider being a writer." I took it to heart. (And have often thought about the power of brief encouraging words.)

In 1985 I wrote my first book, *Christians in the Wake of the Sexual Revolution* (now out of print). Since then I've written 40 more.

I enjoy writing both fiction and nonfiction. After I've finished a novel, I'm always ready for nonfiction and after two or three nonfiction books, I'm eager to tackle another novel.

Not many writers move back and forth between fiction and non-fiction. I've been told it's not smart branding--supposedly it muddles people's perception of a writer. Honestly, that doesn't concern me. I ask God to direct me toward each project. He has, and I'm grateful to be able to write—everything from detective novels and other-worldly fantasy, to children's books, to theological works large and small, on subjects such as money, Heaven, purity, grace, truth and suffering.

Last year I finished a graphic novel (comic book style),

with a fantastic artist, and I'm working on a book about a biblical view of happiness. I love stretching myself as a writer. My favorite parts of writing are reading and researching extensively, indulging my thirst for learning, and interviewing interesting people.

Every writer needs a mission. Mine is to probe our deepest longings for something more, then open a door into the invisible realm so readers can see ultimate realities. One glimpse of the other world weans us from the illusion that reality is limited to our five senses. My life verse is "We look not at the things that are seen but the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). Once we see differently, we live differently.

Writing is both energizing and draining. Sometimes it's a joy. Sometimes, under deadlines and multiple fourteen-hour work days, it feels like a long battle: you just want to be done. And though a book never feels done, eventually you must turn it in.

I thank God for the privilege of being his errand boy, delivering the message that it's not about me, it's about Him. I don't always succeed, but living that way is pure pleasure.

I often hear, "I want to write a book." I'm convinced most people don't really want to write a book, they want to *have written* a book. Some people view writing as easy—not a real job. A physician said, "When I retire I'm going to become a writer." Well, if he's not writing now, waiting until retirement may be too late. What if I said, "When I retire from writing I'm going to become a physician"? Whatever the profession, it takes decades of practice to become the best you can be.

What's easy to read is hard to write. People sometimes say, "God gave me these words." Yet the words may be poorly chosen—and I don't think God wants credit for them. If God leads you to write, great, but get the help you need to write your best for His glory!

Writers are stewards of words, accountable to God for how they are arranged. I constantly seek criticism, running everything by my co-workers at Eternal Perspective Ministries. (I prefer to get it right *before* the book is published!) Honest critics and careful editors are essential. But above all, I need Christ, who said, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). I want to hear God say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant." There's no bigger payoff than that!

I won't deny that it's fun to make the *New York Times* bestsellers list. But my greatest desire is to please the Audience of One. Since His judgment seat is the only one I'll stand before, His opinion is the one that matters:

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men...It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 3:23-24).

I seek to write with all my heart, as a service to the Lord. 100% of my book royalties go to help the needy, support just causes and reach people with the gospel. By God's grace, there are over seven million of my books in print. It's fun to know the Lord is using both the books and the royalties to touch lives.

Whether we build, draw, fix things or make a home for our families, God wants us to yield our gifts to Him, depending on our Savior for the next step, the next breath. I pray that I'll be God's instrument to passionately and accurately convey the truths of His Word.

What do I look forward to? Serving my King as a resurrected person on a resurrected earth, where joy will be the air we breathe. I anticipate meeting those who touched my life, and saying "thanks for being faithful." And then, like all God's children, I'll get to hear from those whose lives the Lord allowed me to touch. What a privilege. What could be better than to be loved by Jesus, to love Him and His people and the New Earth that awaits us, and to serve him, both now and forever? ■



Whether we build, draw, fix things or make a home for our families, God wants us to yield our gifts to Him, depending on our Savior for the next step, the next breath.

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Read tips on writing from Randy and others at [www.epm.org/resources/writing](http://www.epm.org/resources/writing)

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# Shedding Light

on Depression and Thoughts of Suicide

by Randy Alcorn

Fits of depression come over the most of us. Cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy. —Charles Spurgeon



Depression has been called the “common cold of psychological disorders.” Negative thoughts preoccupy and dominate the depressed person’s mind. Sometimes depression is linked to certain events or circumstances, sometimes not. It often produces withdrawal and fatigue, and can become so debilitating that a person ceases to function normally. That in itself leads to further depression.

Often depression is the result of a sense of personal loss. This may be the loss of a loved one, pet, money, job, health, skill, or reputation. Depression almost always involves a negative or deteriorating view of self, which feels like a loss of personhood. Ultimately, any of these may lead to a loss of hope, and a loss of a sense of God’s loving presence.

Depression may stem from physical causes, particularly chemical imbalances. Sometimes it stems from the hormonal imbalances of PMS (Premenstrual Syndrome) or menopause. In such cases both medical and counseling professionals should be consulted.

Twice as many women suffer from depression as men. Nearly three times as many women carry depression to its ultimate extreme by attempting suicide.

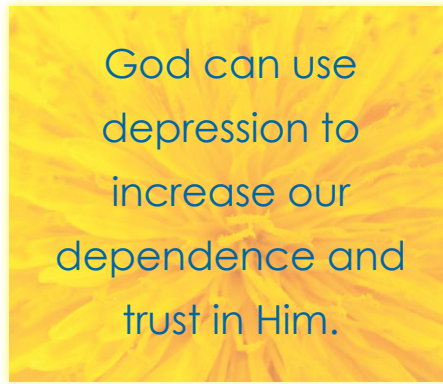
Primary warning signs of suicide include withdrawal, personality changes, quiet resignation, and apparent indifference about life. Common circumstances that seem to trigger suicidal thoughts are lengthy illnesses (especially terminal), unemployment, marital and/or family problems. Sometimes the suicidal person talks as if she doesn’t expect to be around much longer. If these circumstances or symptoms apply to yourself or someone you know, get professional spiritual help immediately.

Most depression does not end in suicide, but it is serious nonetheless. Among its physical effects are aches and pains particularly in the stomach and bowels, changes in appetite, sleep disturbances, and sexual dysfunction. Its mental and emotional effects often include a sense of despair, despondency, and helplessness.

### Depression isn’t always bad.

Some depression comes from simply feeling the crushing weight of pain and brokenness in one’s life and the lives of others around the globe. Of course, self-preoccupied woe-is-me depression quickly becomes deeply unhealthy. But sometimes when we feel burdened, we may simply be joining the whole creation in groaning because of a world of suffering. In that case, we’re in good company, for “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26).

It’s no sin to feel that burden, and sometimes it’s a sin not to. Some of what passes for Christian contentment is, in fact, indifference to the evil and suffering around us. It’s apathy toward the plight of God’s image-bearers, demonstrated by the fact that we do so little and give so little to help them. Our lives should reflect a groaning that gives way to joy,



celebrating what God has done for us in Christ, and thanking Him that He will rescue us once and for all from evil and suffering.

I feel a profound sadness and mourning for human brokenness, for children exploited by the sex trade, killed by abortion, and dying of diseases and disasters. Still, my confidence in an all-good and all-powerful God allows me to simultaneously feel happiness even in this world of evil and suffering. When I ponder the scars on His hands and feet I

say, “Yet will I trust him,” then I seek to be His hands and feet to a needy world.

A novelist friend wrote me:

I went through a long spell of clinical depression. I was even hospitalized for a short time. I felt bereft and hopeless.

...Never, in all my years of being a Christian, did I cling to God so closely. Never had I talked to Him so honestly. Those weeks, months, and even years of questioning and searching drew me nearer to Him. Walking through my discontent led me to a life so much richer than the one I’d been living. God used my depression and pain for something so much greater than I could envision. I’ve learned that there is purpose in struggle... even when we can’t see it.

During her depression my friend couldn’t see anything good. Now, looking back, the good seems obvious.

### God can use depression to increase our dependence and trust in Him.

While I don’t suffer chronic depression, I’ve had a few several month periods of depression that have awakened me to its reality and the hold it can have. Several years ago, for no apparent reason, a cloud of depression descended on me. Day after day, it was my constant companion. God used it in my life, teaching me to trust Him, and giving me some intimate times with Him. I studied the life of Charles Spurgeon who battled depression, and found comfort in the fact that godly men and women had walked the same path I was walking. I saw this experience as part of living under the Curse, and it made me appreciate more deeply the promise of God “No longer will there be any more curse” (Revelation 22:3).

Though I had written a number of books, including *Heaven*, about the world to come, I came to long for it more deeply than ever, clinging to God’s promise for the resurrection and the New Earth.

I blogged about my depression and in particular about Spurgeon’s experience\* and many people wrote me and told their own stories. A few people expressed shock that someone who had written about subjects such as grace and Heaven could ever be depressed! I had to laugh, since far better people than I have experienced far worse depression, including Martin Luther, John Owen, and William Cowper, to name a few. (*continued on next page*)

\* See [www.epm.org/blog/spurgeon/depression](http://www.epm.org/blog/spurgeon/depression)

When I wrote about what I was learning from the depression, someone brought me a “prophetic word” that I was depressed because I wasn’t trusting God. Ironically, I had come to trust God deeper in the midst of the depression than I had before it. God used that period of depression to enrich my life. I hope I don’t ever experience it again—but if I do, I pray He will enrich me through it again.

One morning, after four months of daily depression, I woke up, no longer depressed. I don’t know why it came or went, but I am certain the God of sovereign grace was involved in both its coming and going. Your depression may be short-term, or it may be long-term, but if you are God’s child, know this—even if it lasts most of your present life, it is temporary, and “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18, NASB).

[Sadness, grief, and times of depression are part of life under the Curse; God gives us the resources, including His people, to move forward.](#)

Hurting Christians increasingly complain about the treatment they’ve received from other church people. If you’ve had a bad experience, write out a list of what you wish church people had done for you and what you wish they hadn’t done. Then follow your own counsel and use it as a guideline to reach out today and minister to others who need your wisdom and encouragement.

Don’t grumble about others. Look closely inside the church and you’ll find many believers way ahead of you in their care and compassion. Perhaps you haven’t seen the church helping the suffering because you haven’t stayed with the suffering enough to see what the church is doing. Many hurting people have told me amazing stories of faithful love shown by God’s people in Christ’s body. In hard times, Nanci and I have experienced the same. Imperfect as it is, we thank God for the church.

“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). Reaching out to others in need is one of the greatest cures for loneliness and depression. “In humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3–4).

[Suicide is from the devil, who is a murderer and lies to tempt us to self-murder.](#)

I must mention suicide again because the idea seduces some suffering people. God commands us not to murder (see Exodus 20:13). Suicide is self-murder. God calls us to “endure hardship... like a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3). To take your life is to go absent without leave.

The fact that Heaven will be so wonderful shouldn’t tempt us to take shortcuts to get there. If you’re depressed, you may imagine your life has no purpose—but you couldn’t be

more wrong.

Trust God’s purpose for your life even when you can’t grasp what it is. Value the life He has given you, even when it doesn’t seem worth living. Reach out to others and get help. Talk with someone trustworthy who will stand with you and help you hold on to what’s right and good, including the preservation of the life God has entrusted to you.

As long as God keeps you here on Earth, it’s exactly where he wants you. He’s preparing you for another world. He knows precisely what He’s doing. Through your suffering, difficulty, and depression, He’s expanding your capacity for eternal joy. Our lives on Earth are a training camp to ready us for Heaven.

I know depression can be debilitating. Many godly people have experienced it. But if you are considering taking your own life, recognize this as the devil’s temptation.

Jesus said that Satan is a liar and a murderer (John 8:44). He tells lies because he wants to destroy you (1 Peter 5:8). Don’t listen to the liar. Listen to Jesus, the truth teller (John 8:32; 14:6). Don’t make a terrible ending to your life’s story—finish your God-given course on Earth. When He’s done—not before—He’ll take you home in His own time and way. Meanwhile, God has a purpose for you here on Earth. Don’t desert your post. (And by all means, go to a Christ-centered, Bible-believing church, and get help to find a wise Christian counselor.)

If you don’t know Jesus, confess your sins and embrace his death and resurrection on your behalf. If you do know him, make your daily decisions in light of your destiny. Ask yourself what you can do today, next week, next year, or decades from now to write the best ending to this volume of your life’s story—a story that, by God’s grace, will continue gloriously in the new universe.

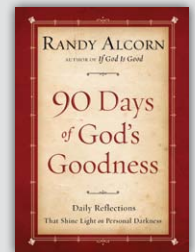
“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4). ■

more

#### EPM Resources

Read Randy’s blogs on depression: [www.epm.org/blog/tag/depression](http://www.epm.org/blog/tag/depression)

Browse our store’s resources on suffering, including *If God Is Good* and *90 Days of God’s Goodness*: [www.epm.org/store/suffering](http://www.epm.org/store/suffering)



#### Recommended Reading

*When the Darkness Does Not Lift* by John Piper

*Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* by David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

*Depression: A Stubborn Darkness—Light for the Path* by Ed Welch

Through your suffering, difficulty, and depression,  
God is expanding your capacity for **eternal joy**.

# words associated with the Word

from Psalm 119

- preserves my life
- your laws are righteous
- teach me knowledge
- all your commands are trustworthy
- your statutes are my heritage forever
- I have more insight than all my teachers
- your word is a lamp to my feet
- all your commands are true
- strengthen me according to your word
- for your laws are good
- your statutes are forever right
- I find comfort in them
- your statutes are my delight
- I have put my hope in your word
- your word, O Lord, is eternal
- they are the joy of my heart
- how sweet are your words to my taste
- and a light for my path
- great peace have they who love your law
- may your laws sustain me
- your promises have been thoroughly tested
- your commands are boundless

Have you experienced its richness today?

You can measure a person's opinion of God by his or her opinion of God's Word. That's why a person who loves God loves His Word, and the person who hates God rejects what God has spoken. God's Word is an extension of Himself – His identity, purposes, affections, and power. —Jonathan Leeman

# How God Uses Stress

## for Our Good and His Glory

by Randy and Nanci Alcorn

Ever been to a football game at half time when the band forms words or pictures in the middle of the field? They look great from up in the stands. But have you thought about what they look like from the sidelines? Pointless, confusing, apparently meaningless. We see life from the sidelines. God sees it from the stands. As we gain perspective, we leave the sidelines and start working our way up.

G.K. Chesterton's character, Father Brown, said "We are on the wrong side of the tapestry." How true. We see the knots, the snarls, and the frayed underside. But God is on the right side of the tapestry—the side He is weaving into a beautiful work of art. We may not always know what the Master Artist is doing in our lives. But the important thing is, He does.

When we see the all-powerful God on the throne of the universe—God our Father committed to our good—we are relieved of much stress. And the stress we must still experience leaves us far richer.

Having a biblical perspective is seeing life through God's eyes. It is seeing order in chaos, use in the useless, and good in the bad. If we are to develop eyes to see God's hand in everything, we must believe (not necessarily understand) what Scripture says about the purpose of stress. *Stress is an effective tool in the hands of our God, a tool that is intended both for His glory and our good.* In this article we will look at some ways God uses stress.

*God uses stress to get our attention.* God created our bodies. He designed them to send us messages. If I stick my hand in fire, my body will send me a message, quickly and clearly. If I ignore it, I'll pay the price.

C.S. Lewis said "pain is God's megaphone." Some of

us are hard of hearing. We ignore physical, mental, and spiritual warning signs. God wants us to tune our ears to the messages He sends us through our minds and bodies.

*God uses stress to help us redefine or rediscover our priorities.* Bill and Evelyn's marriage relationship was a distant one. They had drifted apart over many years, pouring themselves into their jobs and shortchanging their family. But when their son Jason was found in possession of heroin, the months that followed brought unprecedented crisis...and also the desire to pull their marriage back together.

Everyone has priorities. Some have never chosen or experienced the right ones and need to redefine them. Others of us have long known the right priorities and merely need to rediscover them: we've tasted right priorities, but we've allowed ourselves to drift away from them; we've replaced fellowship with entertainment, giving with buying,

and family time with the television, the lawn, the remodeling job, the causes, and the committees.

By abandoning our God-given priorities we set ourselves up to learn a hard lesson. In essence we do what the Israelites did: lived in paneled houses while God's house became a ruin (Haggai 1:4). In response, God sent lack of fulfillment, disillusionment, and failure as His messengers. He withheld His blessing till His people rediscovered their priorities.

Twice in Haggai 1:5-11, God's people are admonished to "Give careful thought to your ways." Stress should take us back to the basics. It is an opportunity to re-evaluate our priorities and bring them in line with God's.

*God uses stress to draw us to Himself.* Time and again it was said of the people of Israel, "But in their distress they turned to the Lord, the God of Israel, and sought him, and he was found by them" (2 Chronicles 15:4). It was in Jonah's darkest hour, in his most stressful circumstances that he said this: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me" (Jonah 2:2). The Psalms are full of references of turning to God, seeking Him and finding Him in times of intense stress.

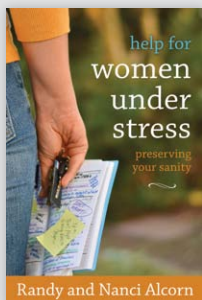
In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears (Psalm 18:6).

When we see the all-powerful God on the throne of the universe—God our Father committed to our good—we are relieved of much stress. And the stress we must still experience leaves us far richer.

### more

In this thoroughly revised and updated edition of *Help for Women Under Stress* originally published in 1986, Randy and Nanci offer you plenty of useful tips and strategies for bringing peace to the chaos of your daily life.

Available exclusively from EPM in print and as an ebook. [www.epm.org/helpforwomenunderstress](http://www.epm.org/helpforwomenunderstress)



I call on the Lord in my distress, and he answers me  
(Psalm 120:1).

When our lives are comfortable and stress-free, too often we withdraw from the Lord into our own worlds of spiritual independence and isolation. Smug and self-satisfied, we forget what life is really all about. But as the thirsty seek for water, those under stress often seek God. Many non-believers have come to Christ and many believers have returned to Him in times of stress.

*God uses stress to discipline us.* Quoting Solomon's words to his son, the writer of Hebrews offers what he calls a word of encouragement:

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons (Hebrews 12:5-7).

(The word son, of course, is generic for "child," and applies equally to God's daughters.)

To some of us, this doesn't sound so encouraging. But we fail to realize how essential discipline is. Scripture says that to withhold discipline from a child is, in essence, child abuse: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him" (Proverbs 13:24). Discipline is corrective. It is remedial, not revengeful. God sends stresses not to get back at us for doing wrong, but to deepen our dependence on Him in order to do right. Though the stressful experience may seem excruciating at the time, it is ultimately all for good:

God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:10-11).

*God uses stress to strengthen our faith.* 1 Peter 1:7 tells us: "These [trials] have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."

There is only one way a muscle grows—through stress. A muscle that is rarely exercised atrophies; it shrinks into uselessness. A muscle seldom stretched beyond its usual limits can only maintain itself. It cannot grow. To grow, a muscle must be taxed. Unusual demands must be placed upon it.

Stress is a demand placed upon our faith. Without it our faith will not, *cannot*, grow.

Ever seen grass grow through asphalt? It's amazing if you think about it. How does grass, pressed flat and robbed of light, persevere and break through hard ground? Yet we've seen it. Somehow God made those tiny blades of grass to rise to the greatest challenge.

In the crucible of stress, as we draw on our resources in Christ, He gives us faith and strength to crack through and rise above the asphalt coat of life under the curse. ■

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# Seeing Yourself

by Dan Phillips

**D**ecades back, I used to ask groups I came to teach whether anyone could define the word "disciple." As a rule, folks were fairly confident, and completely wrong. They'd never been taught about it. Probably the most common answer was "follower." After that came "apostle," or "disciplined person." None of which is true.

The Greek word translated disciple is perfectly straightforward and uncontroversial. It is μαθητής (mathētēs), and it means "student, pupil, learner."

That's it.

What, you're waiting for some deeply-spiritual, mystical sense? There isn't one. And I think that in itself is really terribly important.

The way I've seen many folks approach Christianity in general, and church-selection and church-involvement in particular, has convinced me that they have no clue about this element. They do not see themselves as disciples, which is to say they do not see themselves as students, learners, pupils of Jesus Christ.

For instance, I taught one group of older (than I) folks back in the seventies. The focus was the book of Colossians. I introduced it, and I asked them in the intervening week to read the book. It's four chapters long, and reading it takes all

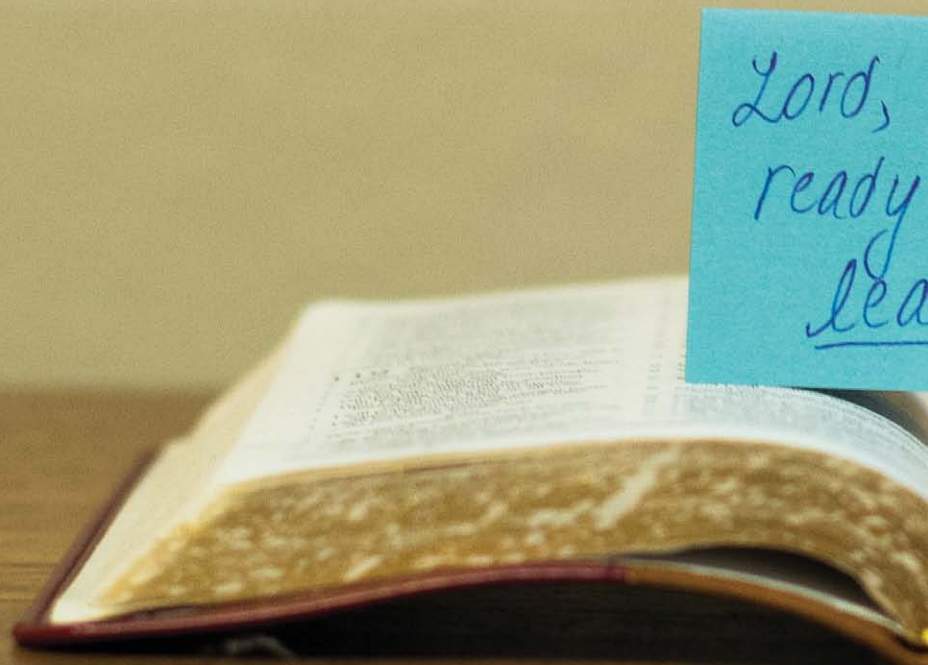
of ten minutes or so.

The next week I asked (casually, friendly) for a show of hands as to who in the class in this long-standing Baptist church had read Colossians in the intervening week. Not a single hand went up. Smiling, I went on with the lessons. No one was caned or assigned sentences.

Yet after the class one brother took me aside and rebuked me. He felt I had been out of line. "You made me feel like I was back in school!" he complained, clearly expecting that I would see that as a bad thing that I would want to avoid at all costs. Because we surely don't want anything like that, right? Nothing where someone teaches, and someone else is expected to learn. Which is to say, we don't want anything like discipling going on.

Christians simply do not see themselves as students who are expected (by God!) constantly to learn and grow, and never to graduate. So when it comes to picking a church, the thought of selecting a church which above all will (hel-lo?) teach them the Word of God simply is not a priority, or perhaps not even a factor. When they evaluate a church, its music or furnishings or programs or a thousand other elements are central, but its effectiveness in teaching them God's Word is not.

But once they have selected a Bible-teaching church, even then this concept seems to fall by the wayside. They sit and stand, sing and pray; they watch the pastor. They go home,



# If as a Disciple

they have lunch. They've already forgotten what happened. So how were they disciples? Surely, if they seriously saw themselves as disciples, they would have taken some steps to make sure that the service contributed to their growth as disciples?

Perhaps someone is thinking, "I don't see the Bible making the big deal about this that you're making." No? How about this?

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

"Make disciples" (mathēteusate) is the lone imperative verb in the Greek text, so it is the anchor-thought. The rest supports this activity. The presence of Jesus is guaranteed to the church as it engages in this activity — making disciples, pupils, students, learners.

"Oh, huh," you say. "I always thought that was about evangelism." Evangelism is included, but it's just the introduction to the whole enchilada, the discipleship enchilada.

But did you know that Jesus defined, in so many words, what it meant to be a genuine disciple? He did in a number

of ways, but in our connection one passage stands out: John 8:31-32.

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Break it down:

- The path to freedom lies in knowing the truth.
- The path to knowing the truth lies in being a genuine disciple/student.
- The path to being a genuine student is in continuing in Jesus' word.

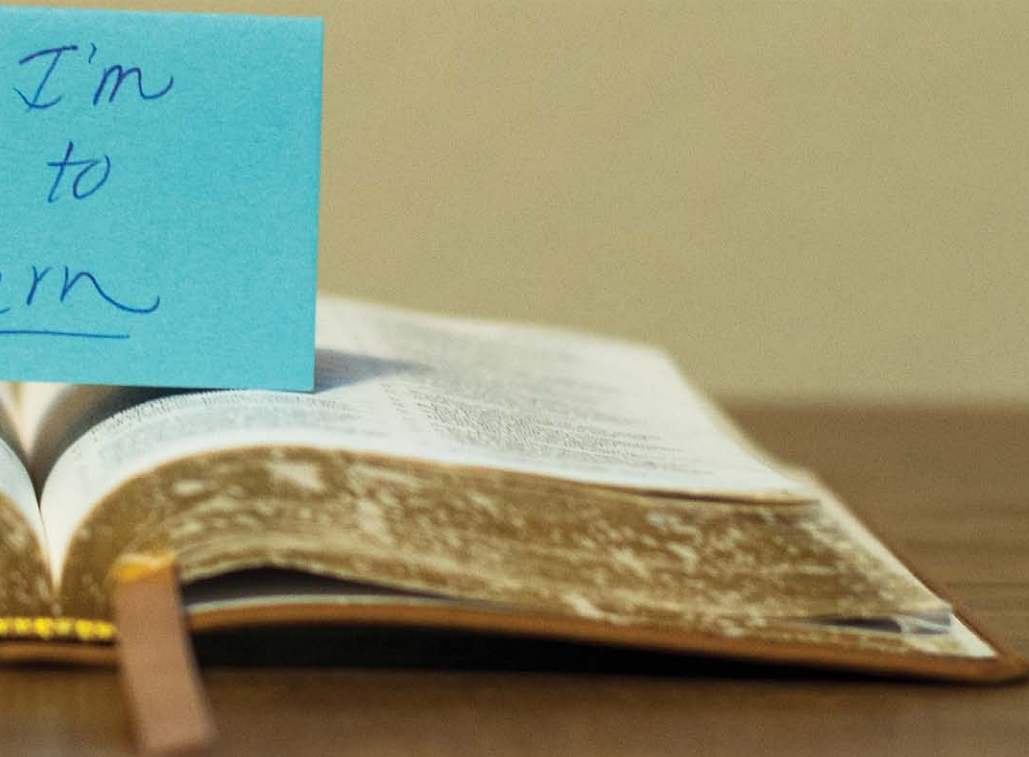
Straightforward, eh?

Spread the word. Make it loud, plain, and inescapable: if you're a real Christian, you're a student. Your priority is to get taught, and to learn. It is to learn the words of God.

And if you're not being a student, you're not being a Christian. It's definitional. Not optional.

And it should affect how we approach church selection, organization, and involvement. ■

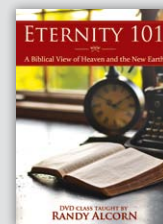
**Dan Phillips** pastors Copperfield Bible Church in Houston, Texas and is author of *The World-Tilting Gospel* (Kregel: 2011) and *God's Wisdom in Proverbs* (Kress: 2011). This article is reprinted with permission from <http://teampyro.blogspot.com>.



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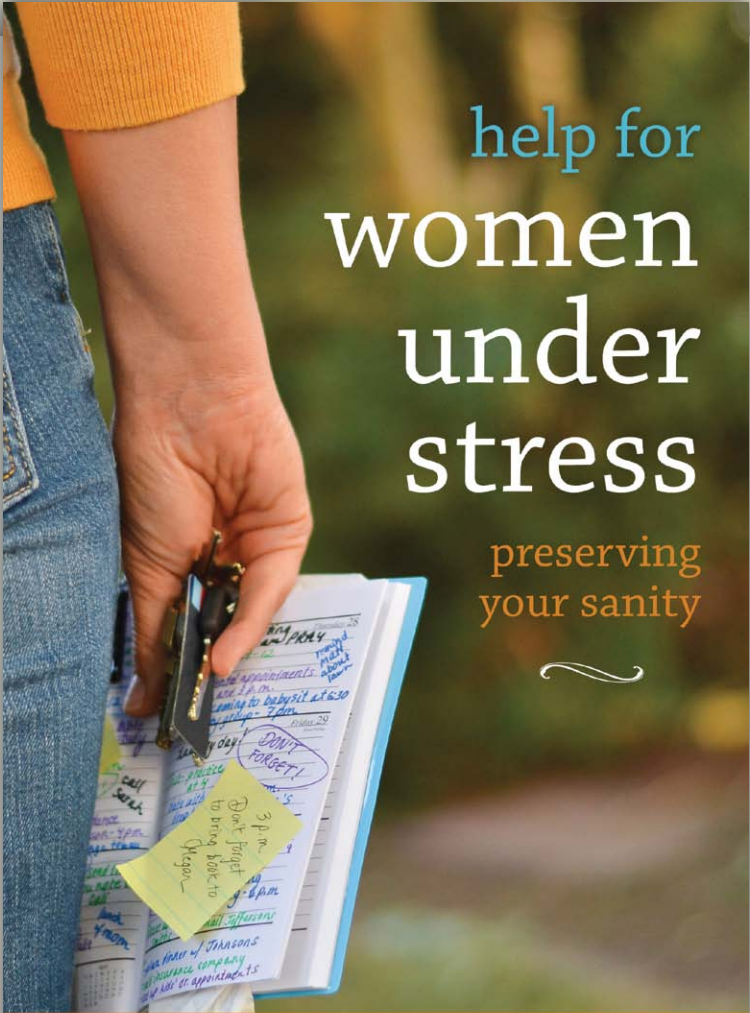
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*Struggling with stress? Don't let it get the best of you.*



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