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What Does a Cross-Bearer Look Like?

by Randy Alcorn



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A friend recently asked me, "What would be some of the characteristics of the life of a person who is bearing their cross? (Matthew 16) What does this cross-bearer look like?"

It got me thinking. Here are my responses:

- Single-minded devotion to the Lord, focus on the calling to follow Him above all else.
- Jesus first, others second, self last.
- Lack of self-indulgence and self-pity; he does what he does gladly, following his Master by choice, not just as demanded by circumstance.

• Because the church is to be a community of cross-bearers, there is interdependence, casting your burdens not only on the Lord, but on each other, supporting each other, helping each other carry the load which at times will be too heavy.

• The cross-carrier is a servant. He doesn't look for others to serve him or baby him; he goes out of his way to serve them.

• When he sees the poor and the needy, he releases his grip on money and things, realizing they belong to his Master, and the way of the cross is

cheerful giving of money and time and skills. A parallel passage to Matthew 16 is Luke 9:23, which reads:

Then Jesus said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. The "take up his cross daily" brings a new, very significant dimension.

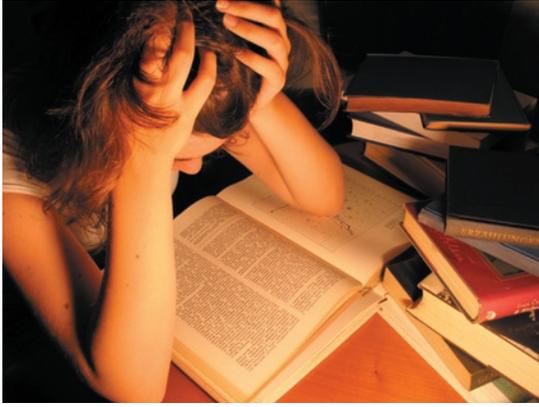
• It means that carrying your cross is not just one big sacrifice that you make, then you're done with, like giving one of your kidneys, or selling your house and giving to the poor or that time you ran out in traffic and pulled the kid back from the bus.

This is something you do every day. So it's a thousand or ten thousand little sacrifices, a lifetime of sometimes unnoticed loving acts, which cumulatively become huge. It's a man who loves his paralyzed wife for

forty years by saying no to his sexual desires daily, and dumps her bag of urine three times a day, to the glory of Jesus.

It's a mother who cares for a son who never gets out of bed, day after day, and does it without complaining. Not just the person who dies in the coliseum in one triumphant hour, torn apart by lions because he refused to deny Christ.





- It's saying no to sleep to get up and pray and read the Word day after day.

- It's saying no to living in a mansion and owning a nicer car even though that might be fun—but not as fun as giving to keep a child alive, of living more simply so that others may simply live, day after day.

- It's doing the humble job that nobody applauds, but needs to be done, and which is seen sometimes by no one but the Audience of One.

Really, what it means to carry your cross daily is to be humble, a servant, God-centered and others-centered, not self-centered. Yet, ironically, to be a servant is ultimately in your eternal self-interests.

In my novel *Safely Home* Li Quan dies daily. This brilliant scholar, Harvard summa cum laude, serves as a locksmith's assistant because in China an outspoken Christian can't be a university professor and great writer, which was his dream. To Ben Fielding, Li Quan's rich American businessman friend, he quotes Martin Luther King who said, "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven

and earth will pause to say, 'Here lives a great street sweeper who did his job well.'"

In my book *Heaven* I tell of an old black bellman who died daily, but with good cheer. So what does it look like? Here is the excerpt:

Should we be excited that God will reward us by making us rulers in his kingdom? Absolutely. Jesus said, "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven" (Matthew 5:12).

God will choose who reigns as kings, and I'm confident some great surprises are in store for us. Christ gives us clues in Scripture as to the type of person he will choose: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven....Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth....Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3, 5,10). Also, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:5-6).

Look around you to see the meek and the humble. They may include street sweepers, locksmith's assistants, bus drivers, and stay-at-home moms who spend their days changing diapers, doing laundry, packing lunches, drying tears, and driving carpools.

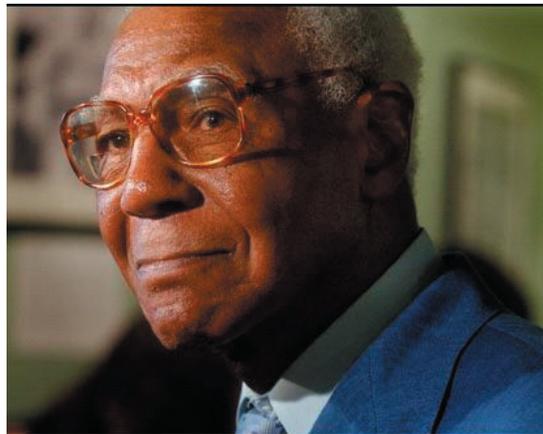
I once gave one of my books to a delightful hotel bellman in Atlanta. This man spends his days carrying people's luggage and serving them in countless ways. I discovered he was a committed Christian. He said he'd been praying for our writers group, which was holding a conference at the hotel.

The next day I gave him a little gift.

He seemed stunned, overwhelmed. With tears in his eyes he said, "You didn't need to do that. I'm only a bellman." The moment he said those words, it struck me that this brother had spent his life serving other people. It will likely be someone like him that I'll have the privilege of serving

under in God's kingdom. He was "only a bellman" who spoke with warmth and love, who served, who quietly prayed in the background for the success of a Christian writers' conference in his hotel, his appointed place of service. I saw Jesus in that bellman, and there was no "only" about him.

Who will be the kings of the New Earth? I think that bellman will be one of them. And I will consider it an honor to carry his bags.



"I'm only a bellman."

*Question &
Answer by
Randy Alcorn*

Doesn't the concept of tithing rob people of the joy of giving?

The legalism of tithing is why everyone gets edgy when the subject of tithing is brought up, because the giving that is taught to believers is a giving out of obligation and guilt and not one of freedom and joy.

The kinds of giving you refer to in your books, in 2 Corinthians 8 and Acts 2 and 4, are perfect examples of what I am talking about. That kind of giving came from an overflow of joy and not from the apostles "harping" on getting their giving up to at least 10%. The concept of tithing robs everyone who gives less than 10% from any sense of joy from their giving because they have been made to feel guilty because it is too little. This guilt will seldom, if ever, produce a joyful giver.

What about a young couple who is only able to give 5%, but for whom this is giving by faith? Wouldn't God be pleased with that gift, and wouldn't they be blessed even though it falls well below the Old Testament requirement?

According to a 2002 Barna poll, only 3% of Christians give 10% or more. Most of these are in churches that emphasize tithing.

So waiting for people to overflow with joy is not working very well, is it?

Acts 2-type giving came into my life after I tasted the joy of giving, but had I been told "giving is completely optional, no need to stretch yourself, start anywhere you want," I wonder how far I would ever have gone in giving.

I believe that nearly any young couple in this country could give 10%, and if they did, they would experience joy and see God do great things. But the average American Christian gives away 2.5% of his income. To say that God is happy with His people (who He went to the cross for, and who He put in the most affluent society in human history) giving one fourth of what He required of people without the indwelling Messiah,

living in poverty, is something I find difficult to imagine, both biblically and logically.

There are innumerable younger and older people in our churches who could give away 10% simply by forgoing Starbucks, Hollywood Video, and eating out—not to mention new cars, home entertainment centers, etc. In other words, we're not even talking sacrifice. I suggest that starting at 5% "or whatever you choose" is not really being helpful to those people. Would I rather that they give 5% than nothing or 2%? Of course. But I just don't see the removal of the tithe as the training wheels being any real solution to getting people up on the bicycle of giving. Since we have to start somewhere, why not start where God started with His people?

I also believe that to think of most churches being full of legalistic tithers is out of touch with reality. That Barna poll found that only 3% of Christians tithe. If we found that only 3% of Christians observe a day of rest, would we conclude our churches are full of legalistic sabbath-keepers? I wouldn't.

10% is not some lofty goal, just a starting place, but starting is important. The question is whether we should encourage people to move from nothing and 2, or 3% to 10%, where God started his nation Israel, as a stepping stone to the truly generous giving to be found beyond 10%.

What I say to people is, if you're uncomfortable starting at 10% because you think it's legalistic, that's fine; start at 11 or 12% or 20%, or 40%. But if you're going to start at less than 10%, then realize you're elevating the law over grace by saying that the law produced greater fruit in a poor culture than the transforming work of the Holy Spirit does in an affluent culture. Personally, I just can't buy that.



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The Indispensable Father by Rick Johnson

Fathering is at the heart of masculinity, of what it means to be a man.

Men, you are the leaders of your families. You might be reluctant to assume that role. You might even deny that it falls to you. Nonetheless, you *are* your family's de facto leader, whether you choose to believe it or not.

Leaders are always the highest priority targets in any war. The enemy knows that if he can kill the commander, then the troops are easier to defeat. Cut off the head and the body dies. The body in this case is your family. One way to fight back and be the leaders God created us to be is to be aware of our roles, our responsibilities, and our influence with those we lead.

You may not think of yourself as being particularly influential or even successful at life. Maybe you don't make a lot of money, lead a large group of people, save lives, or invent amazing gadgets. Maybe life has even beaten you down and you've lost confidence in your abilities. Consequently, you don't think of yourself as a big deal. But you can bet your boy (and girl) does. He thinks you're a very big deal. He doesn't know or care what the outside world thinks. He only knows that, between the four walls of your home, you are about the biggest, wisest, most powerful person alive. Oh, he knows that you're not perfect. But he doesn't care, because you're just good enough to be indispensable in his life.

Fathering is at the heart of masculinity, of what it means to be a man. Godly fathers put others' needs before their own. If you're like me, you spend the majority of your conscious thought and effort on satisfying your own wants and needs. It's almost an unconscious response to life. But if we are to be authentic men and fathers, we need to rethink that attitude, to consciously make sacrifices so others can benefit and prosper.

When fathers neglect this duty or are absent from the home, families are attacked by

predators. Young men, such as gang members, raised without the influence of older men often become marauding wolves themselves...predators preying on women and children for their own self-gratification.

The Bible likens families to flocks of sheep. Children, like lambs, are naive and simple in their understanding of the world. Fathers are like sheep dogs guarding the flock from marauding wolves. We protect our families from human predators, television programs, movies, music, books, corrupt friends, or any number of people or influences that enter into a child's life.

By the way, it's fitting that sheep dogs come from the wolf genus, so they are no stranger to the wolves' traits and habits. As dads we often find the hackles rising on our necks when we sense a wolf parading in sheep's clothing around our kids. I once told my teenage daughter, "I might not always know why, but I know a wolf when I see one; I can sense him." Of course my daughter says that I think all boys are wolves, but I just tell her that's because I used to be one. It takes one to know one.

When I was dating, I was, like all young guys, deathly afraid of the fathers of the girls I went out with. If the majority of fathers

showed any interest in meeting the boys their daughters were dating, I suspect that nearly all young men would be forced to remain celibate until marriage.

I stopped by an apartment complex the other day to visit a young boy whose single mother had asked me to meet with. As I pulled into the large complex, I noticed

at least 35-40 kids playing in the parking lot. The kids were of all ages, from toddlers up to teenagers. Several of the older boys were in a group wearing gang attire, aggressively posturing, smoking pot, and swearing loudly. A number of young ladies were hanging around them, and in their craving



for masculine affection, trying to get their attention by wearing suggestive clothing. Rap music was blaring from a communal speaker for all the kids to hear, no matter how young. The lyrics of the songs were so vulgar that they would have embarrassed the sailors on the Navy ship I was stationed on. Yet these children played amidst this chaos as if it were a normal part of growing up. The only adults around were a few predatory single men who skirted the perimeter of the action, looking for weakened prey.

My first thought was, "What chance do these children have of growing up to lead a normal, productive, happy and fulfilled life?" My second thought was, "Where are the adults? Where are all the men?" When I spoke to the mother, I learned that there were no men around because there are no men who live there, except the few I noted earlier scanning the flock for victims. I had just entered the realm of fatherless America. It was a depressing place filled with despair and hopelessness.

I came by the apartment complex several weeks later, on a weekend. Many children were again out playing, but this time four or five visiting fathers were out interacting and supervising them. This time there were no predators lurking about, no gang attire, no drugs, no loud rap music, no half-naked girls, and no swearing. What a difference positive male influence makes. It was as if the sun had come out over this courtyard of children all because a few men had taken the time to be with them.

Before I became a Christian I was concerned about my fathering skills. Fathering is a modeled behavior—we imitate what we see. Not having had a very good role model growing up, I was not exactly sure of what to do in certain situations. I found myself reacting instead of having a proactive game plan. Reacting to situations often forced me to use anger instead of wisdom. Even after I started reading books to improve my fathering skills, I was still not confident in my abilities. The books encouraged looking for "teaching moments" to use as lessons. I wasn't sure what a teaching moment was, much less what to say or do when it came along. Thus, I found myself evading or walking away from my responsibilities, thinking I was avoiding failure. I knew my children not only expected a better father, but deserved one. And I knew my wife was

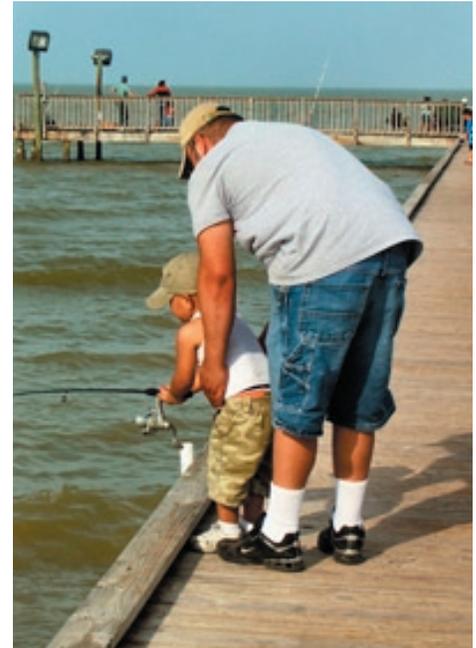
watching and evaluating my role as a father. The prospect of losing her respect was more than I wished to endure. But by walking away from my responsibilities, and trying to avoid failing actively, I was still failing. I was just failing passively, which was even worse!

Many men I talk to have the same feelings of inadequacy regarding their fathering abilities. Without the proper training and role modeling it can seem like an overwhelming responsibility.

Let me say this—you are the man God chose to be the father of your children! God could have picked any man on earth for this task, but in His infinite wisdom He chose you. Even if you don't have confidence in your fathering skills, God says you fit the bill perfectly for His plan for your family. He knows all your strengths and weaknesses, and He determined before time began that you would be the father of your children.

Does that make you feel better or just more terrified? Relax, if you are reading this, you are seeking knowledge and wisdom on how to become a better dad. That speaks well of your heart. If you are sincere and persevere, God will honor that worthy desire by working in your life to grant you that wish. I prayed many times to my Heavenly Father for wisdom in raising my children, and it feels now as though He has started honoring that request. Slowly but surely, I found myself recognizing "teaching moments" when they occurred. And by God's grace, He spoke through my mouth in many of those occasions—surprising even me with the wisdom that popped out! Once I began living a life of intentional fathering, instead of just reacting to what life threw at me, God began blessing my efforts.

Today, I love being a father. For years, I dreaded the thought of parenting teenagers. Now, however, I find the challenges of raising teenagers to be exhilarating—even though these years are typically the most unsatisfying for a father. The natural curiosity teens have about life—the hormonal highs and lows, launching them into the world as productive, happy adults. Believe it or not, I find all of these to be fun, though



Slowly but surely, I found myself recognizing "teaching moments" when they occurred.



challenging, and I find great satisfaction when God gives me the wisdom to address these needs.

He can give you the same fulfillment in your family. Keeping a good attitude is half the battle.

Believe me when I say I know how tough it is being a man and a father today. It feels like you give and work and struggle, and there's never enough of you to go around. The pressures are unrelenting. And yet, you are so important that you are nearly irreplaceable in the lives of your children—especially your sons. Fatherhood is a privilege given by God, and with that privilege comes the power to impact lives. Exercised responsibly for good, that power can lead to God's blessing on you and your family.

Privilege, power, responsibility, sacrifice. They're all part of the same package. They all belong to a father.

Be a man. Stand tall. Give your son an example of masculinity that will survive down through the generations. I've heard men speak in reverent tones of their grandfathers or even great-grandfathers they've never met. The power of the masculine legacy they left behind has cured and hardened down through the ages like a concrete foundation of manliness. Your kids are counting on you to provide that foundation for them and their future children.

This article is excerpted from Rick Johnson's book, Better Dads Stronger Sons—How Fathers Can Guide Boys to Become Men of Character. Rick is the founder of Better Dads, a fathering skills program designed to inspire and equip men to be more engaged in the lives of their children. To find out more about his ministry, go to www.betterdads.net.

"It is I, be not afraid" by Charles Spurgeon

"We know that all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

Upon some points a believer is absolutely sure. He knows, for instance, that God sits in the stern-sheets of the vessel when it rocks most. He believes that an invisible hand is always on the world's tiller, and that wherever providence may drift, Jehovah steers it. That reassuring knowledge prepares him for everything.

He looks over the raging waters and sees the spirit of Jesus treading the billows, and he hears a voice saying, "It is I, be not afraid." He knows too that God is always wise, and, knowing this, he is confident that there can be no accidents, no mistakes; that nothing can occur which ought not to arise. He can say, "If I should lose all I have, it is better that I should lose than have, if God so wills: the worst calamity is the wisest and the kindest thing that could befall to me if God ordains it." "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God." The Christian does not merely hold this as a theory, but he knows it as a matter of fact.



Everything *has* worked for good as yet; the poisonous drugs mixed in fit proportions have worked the cure; the sharp cuts of the lancet have cleansed out the proud flesh and facilitated the healing. Every event as yet has worked out the most divinely blessed results; and so, believing that God rules all, that He governs wisely, that He brings good out of evil, the believer's heart is assured, and he is enabled calmly to meet each trial as it comes.

The believer can, in the spirit of true resignation pray, "Send me what thou wilt, my God, so long as it comes from Thee; never came there an ill portion from Thy table to any of Thy children."

Say not my soul, 'From whence can God relieve my care?

Remember that Omnipotence has servants everywhere.

His method is sublime, His heart profoundly kind,

God never is before His time, and never is behind.'

Behind the Scenes at EPM by Stephanie Anderson

When Randy Alcorn does research for a new book, Bonnie Hiestand gets to work.

You won't see her name alongside his on a book cover, but for Bonnie, behind the scenes is right where she wants to be.

Bonnie has worked for Randy on and off for the past 24 years, originally as his secretary when he was a pastor at Good Shepherd Community Church near Gresham, Oregon. For the past 11 years, she has worked as a graphic designer and secretary for Eternal Perspective Ministries.

When Randy gets ready to write another book, he often reads several dozen books by other authors to research his topic—like the 140 books he read before writing *Heaven*.

It is Bonnie's responsibility to type the dozens of quotes he underlines and the notes he writes circling around book margins and on scraps of paper, a job she lovingly calls "deciphering hieroglyphics." She's even interpreted a note scrawled on a restaurant napkin.

"When Randy reads a book for research, I read it too," Bonnie says. She especially enjoyed typing Randy's notes when he was doing research for his murder mystery novel *Deception*.

"When I type up Randy's research information from the book he reads, I get to read these deep books, by people like John Piper and Charles Spurgeon."

As the daughter of a Baptist pastor, Bonnie grew up knowing she wanted to support others in ministry. "I enjoy enabling other people to be up front," she says. "I feel that's where God has gifted me."

Walking into her office, it's hard to miss the small handmade quilt hanging above her desk or the tole-painted vase sitting on her shelf. A visit to her country-style home reveals there is a quilt or wall hanging she's made in every room of her

house, even the bathroom. Using her artistic ability, she admits, is one of her favorite pastimes.

These days she puts those skills to use by creating, designing, and formatting the quarterly newsletter *Eternal Perspectives*, which is a strategic part of EPM's ministry.

The newsletter was born in 1990 when Randy began typing up a letter to send to EPM's supporters. It went through several revisions in subsequent years, including when Bonnie took over formatting and preparing the newsletter in 1997.

The newsletter has come a long way since it first began. Today, it is a 16-page publication received in the mail by approximately 18,000 subscribers. It is also available for download in beautiful full color on the EPM website (www.epm.org).

But the goal behind *Eternal Perspectives* is more than creating an attractive publication.

The quarterly newsletter is designed to share timely articles written by Randy—and selected others—on a variety of subjects, always with the goal of encouraging people to live in light of eternity.

One reader summed up their impression as follows: "I appreciate your newsletter so much and am always looking for good material God can use to stretch me! At the brink of despair and desperation, your newsletter came in the mail, and it was as if God was speaking to me through you in a very clear way. I have stayed up late tonight

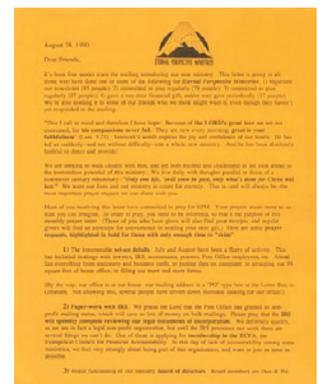
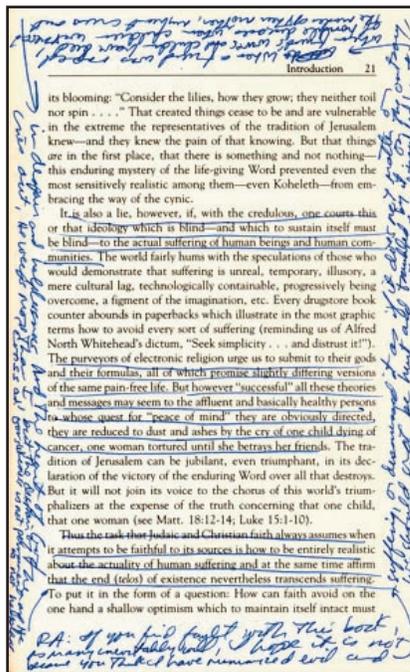
pondering what God did and I am eternally grateful."

* * *

Bonnie and her husband Dennis are the parents of two college-age children, Jennifer and Chris, and enjoy cruising in their '52 Chevy.



The newsletter has come a long way since it first began.



1990 Newsletter



My Favorite Books by Randy Alcorn

My Favorite Nonfiction

God is an author. The universe itself is his book. Each person is a sentence, paragraph, or page. History really is His story. Christ is the Word, the very essence of God, and expression of God. We are created in God's image, and made to be what Tolkien called sub-creators, authors who create and weave together both nonfiction and fiction, marvelous stories on which our imaginations can soar. When we write and read such works, He is pleased.

Books and bookstores have had an enormous influence on my own life. I came to Christ as a teenager, at Powell Valley Covenant Church in Gresham, Oregon, less than a mile from where I live now. My first youth pastor, Paul Siwick, did me a huge favor—he gave me a key to his office, so I could go in any time and read his books, hundreds of them. I read everything I could get my hands on.

There was an elderly couple in our church, named Bill and Martha Kuntz. They had a Christian bookstore in their house in Gresham, my hometown, right near the corner of Burnside and Powell Valley Road, by what is now the big Fred Meyer. I would go there several days a week, for hours at a time. They would point out books for me to read. They introduced me to Lewis, Schaeffer, and Tozer, and books such as *Tortured for Christ*, *God's Smuggler*, *Through Gates of Splendor*, and *The Cross and the Switchblade*.



Over the years I bought and read portions or all of thousands of good books, many of which are now in our church library. I cannot divorce God's works of grace in my life from good books. In my book *Heaven*, I talk about books the Bible says are now in Heaven, and I give arguments for believing

other books will be written and read on the New Earth.

I love a good movie, but I find that for me television is incapable of having the deep and profound positive effect on my spiritual life that books do. That's one reason I'm so concerned about the plunging literacy rates for young people, especially boys. In a day when we are drowning in popular culture and TV shows and video games, may we and our children and grandchildren break away from obsession with the trivial and become creatures of the eternal. Those who don't grow up to be readers will not be readers of God's Word.

When you discover something really good, you want to share it with others. Here are some of my all time favorite nonfiction books.

Some favorite nonfiction, after the Bible:

- The Knowledge of the Holy*, A. W. Tozer
- Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis
- Knowing God*, J. I. Packer
- Desiring God*, John Piper
- He is There and He is Not Silent*, Francis Schaeffer
- Loving God*, Chuck Colson

Other books I've enjoyed in recent years include titles by John Piper, Wayne Grudem, Calvin Miller, Joni Eareckson Tada, and D. A. Carson. A great book I finished recently is *The North Face of God*, by Ken Gire. And here are some books I really enjoyed when I read them long ago:

- Your God is Too Small*, J.B. Phillips
- Through Gates of Splendor*, Elisabeth Elliot
- Tortured for Christ*, *God's Smuggler*, and *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (three books on the suffering church that greatly impacted me many years ago)
- Peace Child*, Don Richardson
- The Everlasting Man*, G.K. Chesterton
- Principles of Spiritual Growth*, Miles Stanford
- The Calvary Road*, Roy Hession
- George Mueller of Bristol*, A. T. Pierson
- The Church at the End of the 20th Century*, Francis Schaeffer
- Where is God When it Hurts*, Phillip Yancey
- The Joy of Fearing God*, Jerry Bridges
- Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster
- Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- Disciple*, Juan Carlos Ortiz
- Kingdoms in Conflict*, Chuck Colson

I cannot divorce God's works of grace in my life from good books.

No Wonder They Call Him the Savior,
Max Lucado
When People Are Big and God is Small,
Edward Welch
From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya,
Ruth Tucker
The Pursuit of Holiness, Jerry Bridges
The Case for Christ and The Case for Faith,
Lee Strobel
How Now Shall We Live?, Chuck Colson

My Favorite Fiction

Since I'm a big Narnia fan, and the *Prince Caspian* movie has been released, so I'm going to plug it, even though this is an article about books. Caspian is a fun movie, true to the spirit and content of the book (though to work on the big screen there had to be significant additions and subtractions).

Before getting to Narnia and some of my other favorite fiction, let me go back in time, to my childhood.

I grew up in a non-Christian home. I learned to love reading through comic books: *Archie* and the Marvel comics among them, especially the *Fantastic Four*. But mainly I was a DC fan, my favorites being *The Justice League of America* (Green Lantern was my hero) and *The Legion of Super Heroes* (go, Lightning Lad). From there I dove into science fiction and fantasy, spending my nights looking through my telescope, then coming to bed freezing and reading science fiction by flashlight under my covers, so Mom wouldn't see the light on.

Much as I would have enjoyed video games and computers as a boy, I'm profoundly grateful they didn't exist then. If they would have, I'm afraid I wouldn't have come to love reading as I did. (Which creates a real challenge for today's Christian parents, doesn't it? How do you cultivate a love for reading in children, especially your boys, when there is so much in our culture working against it? And especially when we remember that those who are not readers will not be readers of God's Word. So will tomorrow's church leaders and family leaders know Scripture?)



I vividly remember forty years ago looking through the kids' fiction section in the old Gresham library, and discovering a book I checked out numbers of times over the next years: *Stadium Beyond the Stars*, by Milton Lesser. It centered on a journey to the interplanetary Olympics.

Not a great book by literary standards, but a wonderful book to me to this day, not simply the book but how the book fed my longing for something greater, for adventure beyond my world. As C. S. Lewis said of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, "it baptized my imagination."

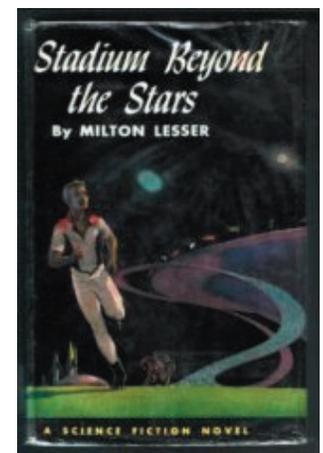
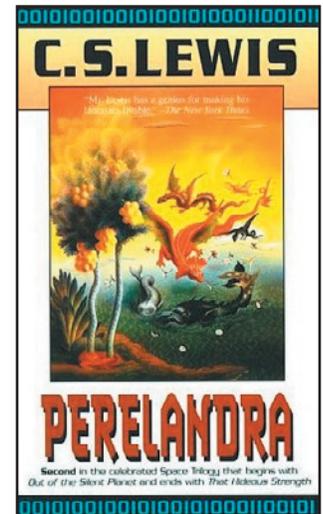
It was a great joy to hunt down *Stadium Beyond the Stars* online a few years ago, to order and reread it and be taken back in time forty years and forward in time a few hundred years. When I see it on my shelf, my heart is moved.

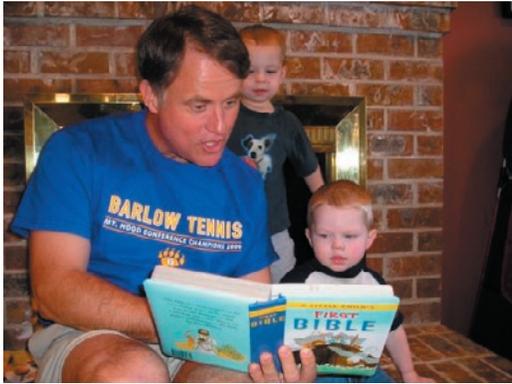
I think of how God had his hand on my life long before I was in high school, when I read for the first time a book that really captivated me... the Bible. That Book came alive to me when I met the Author, who soon became my best friend. Can't wait for all the adventures He has awaiting us, His children, in the new universe.

Here are some of my favorite novels (with apologies to Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Dickens, Hemingway, and Steinbeck, who didn't make the cut).

And here's a disclaimer—there are a lot of contemporary Christian fiction authors whose books I've read and loved. But because many of these have become my friends over the years, I just can't get started, or I couldn't stop. (Okay, one example: *The Atonement Child*, by Francine Rivers; a powerful novel.)

Instead, here are books mainly that I read many years ago, and a number of them I've reread, with delight. As Lewis said, any book not worth rereading is not worth reading the first time. (Walter Wangarin's books are more recent, but since he's not a personal friend I'll keep him on the list; besides yesterday in the car I was listening to an old cassette of him reading his book *Paul*, and I was captivated by his mastery of the language.)





The Chronicles of Namia (7), C. S. Lewis
The Lord of the Rings (3), J. R. R. Tolkien
Perelandra, C. S. Lewis
 (closely followed by the other two in the space trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet* and *That Hideous Strength*)

The Singer trilogy, including *The Singer*, *The Song*, and *The Finale*), Calvin Miller; okay, Calvin became my friend, but it was twenty years after I first read his books, so that's different.

The Odyssey and *The Iliad*, Homer
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain

The Odyssey and *The Iliad*, Homer
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain

Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe
The Complete Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
The Screwtape Letters, C. S. Lewis
The Chosen, Chaim Potok
In His Steps, Charles Sheldon
Pontius Pilate, Paul Maier
Ben Hur, Lew Wallace
The Birth, Gene Edwards
The Mantle (name later changed to *Elijah*), William H. Stephens
Paul, Walter Wangerin
The Book of God, Walter Wangerin

I think it's likely I've not yet read my favorite novel. Not just because it's out there and I haven't yet discovered it, but because it may not be written until after the resurrection, when we're on the New Earth. Think of the book discussions we could have there!

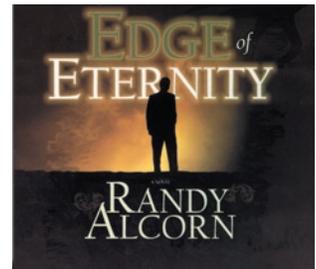
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Heaven booklet
Heaven for Kids
Heaven Study Guide
Heaven for Kids
Lord Foulgrin's Letters

The Purity Principle
The Purity Principle Study Guide
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Letters to EPM

I am 20 years old, a 2nd-year theology student. I finished your book *Edge of Eternity*. My faith has been restored together with my hope and trust in God, The Almighty, and I thank Him for fellow chasm-crossers like you, sir. I share so many likenesses and faults with the characters and rejoiced in the solutions to their problems. — **T. R.**

Edge of Eternity opens very quickly into a surreal place that will leave you confused and sometimes frustrated through the first 40 pages. I put the book down, and almost forgot about it for several weeks. I am very thankful that I picked it up again and stayed with it during this very strange opening.

Like *Pilgrim's Progress*, the protagonist is on a journey in a strange land. Unlike the classic, however, the character's names and the places they visit or not quite so obvious in what they are analogous to. But when clarity comes, it is like a spiritual awakening, and often includes having to deal with feelings that we'd rather leave in a closet somewhere. Skewered is a word that comes to mind.

This book easily makes my top 10 list, and I have consumed 1000s of books. I don't think you can read it to the end without having it change your life...at least for a season. — **R. K.**

I have attended evangelical churches all my life, and even graduated from Moody Bible Institute. Yet I do not recall the truths of Heaven ever being presented as clearly as you did in your book, *Heaven*. I've heard of the "new heavens and new earth" many times, but never really understood much about it. Nor do I recall ever hearing of the "intermediate heaven."

Thank you SO much for your wonderful treatment of a subject about which, sadly, Christians are ignorant. I too was part of that group until I read your book. To paraphrase the quote on the dust cover, "I can now imagine what heaven will be like." — **E. C.**

I just finished reading *The Purity Principle*. I am so grateful for this book. I struggle with purity in mind and have been dealing with this for years. I love the way

the book starts—with a stern warning. This helped me to see the path I am on by allowing just a little sin. Crazy as it may seem I just saw a movie with mermaids in it. With Randy's example of the person having hooks, I now visualize the person I have lustful thoughts for as a mermaid with hooks pulling me down into the dark waters. Also the suggested questions for church leaders to ask one another are helpful as well.

There is no other book like *The Purity Principle*. I read it, and re-read it, and re-read it. — **Administrator at Bible school in Cuba**

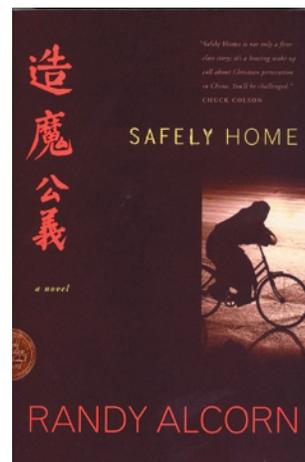
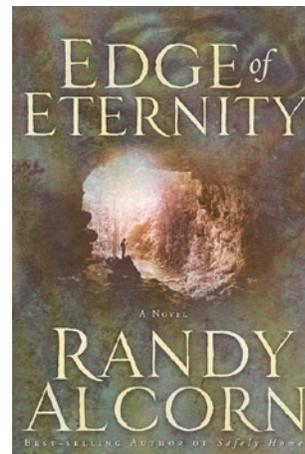
It is late and I have just finished your book *Safely Home*. As a Christian I realized there have been, and are many persecuted for their faith around the world. I often tell others to look beyond life in the U.S. because there is much suffering we know nothing about. Most Americans are very self-involved.

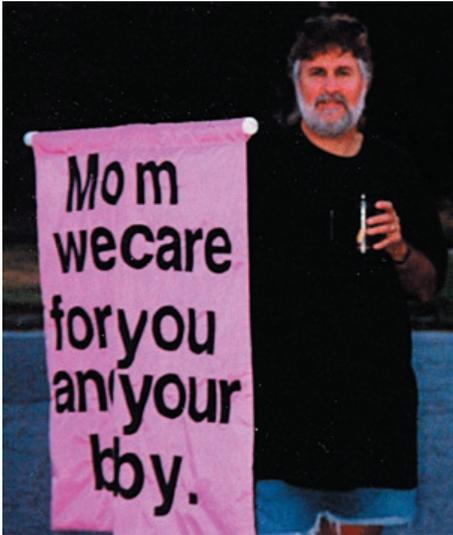
I thought I understood until I read your book. I now realize that I understand nothing. I work in Social Services and thought I—notice the *I*—was doing some good. I pray every day that I do this work for the glory of God, not for my own selfish interests. A whole new spiritual awakening happened for me and my eyes have been opened. I have been selfish! I pray for those who are persecuted in the name of the Lord that they may find peace in his loving arms. I pray that when—not if—this persecution reaches us, as it is beginning to, that I can withstand for the sake of my Lord.

I speak of the Lord now but need to do so without fear. I have been a Christian since 1991 and have made many mistakes since due to my lack of trust in the One who created me. But my small complaints are nothing in the face of such suffering. The Lord is King and may His Will be done! This has been a life-changing experience! — **S. C.**

I should have written to you years ago. My daughter died. A friend sent me your book, *Deadline*. That book helped me heal more than any other factor. It gave me an entirely new look at Heaven and the joy my daughter has now. It was a wonderful book that gives me eternal hope—what joy we shall share there with her being well!

Thanks to God for your contribution to the church! — **I. O.**





Denny Hartford

An Encounter While Sidewalk Counseling

by Denny Hartford

One morning at the abortion clinic an arrogant, blasphemous man came roaring at me with graphic threats of what violent (though physiologically unlikely) tortures he was about to inflict on me. The fellow had pulled up with his daughter and parked his car in the north parking lot along the sidewalk where I normally stand and pray. My wife and her friend were the sidewalk counselors of the day but, as they were on the west side

of the building, I began to speak to him while holding my regular sign (a huge, precious picture of a beautiful baby with the word "LIFE" emblazoned atop it). I started to tell them my usual remarks, "Good morning, guys. You know, the reason we're here this morning is simply to tell you the truths about abortion that you'll certainly not hear inside this place—truths about the dangers of abortion to a woman's health, the proofs of that tiny child's humanity, and the whole host of alternatives we have for you, including a caring and professional doctor who can take care of you and your baby—no charge whatsoever."

But, as you might guess, I didn't manage to finish these comments before the enraged fellow was exploding in my face. And, after a few more sputtering threats, he stepped back

a couple of paces and then rushed at me, shooting out both of his arms in a punch-like push in order to knock me down. The force of his attack was so strong that I was quite surprised to find myself still standing. Indeed, the only effect was a pretty dramatic recoil on the part of my assailant. It was like he had hit a spring. The guy acted rather shocked himself and for the first time since he had climbed out of his car, he was stone silent.

Therefore, my next appeal to him, though quietly stated, was crystal clear. "You know, this rage comes from your own knowledge of how wrong this is. C'mon, man; don't let this abortionist take the life of your grandchild. Let us help you do the right thing here." The fellow just stood and stared at me, foam having formed at the corners of his frown, but the storm seemed to have passed away. In another moment, the policeman who shamefully serves as the abortion clinic's escort/guard had finally arrived on the scene and the man was placidly, wordlessly guided inside the clinic.

My friend, himself a proud and very kind-hearted grandfather, was particularly moved by this man's tragic dereliction of duty and came over, put his arm around my shoulders, and we had a brief prayer together. We thanked the Lord for His protection and prayed that the man and his daughter would yet receive the truth with which He had challenged them. And it was just after this prayer that I was struck by the irony of how this encounter with the angry man connected with a Scripture I had read just moments earlier. Though I was holding my baby sign the whole time, in my left hand

I still gripped my Bible and so I turned quickly back to Proverbs 12, the chapter I had been reading there on the sidewalk and using each verse as a springboard for "targeted" prayers. And yes, there it was in Proverbs 12:3 – a verse that cast an interesting light on this fellow's unsuccessful attempt to push me over.

It reads: "A man will not be established by wickedness but the root of the righteous will not be moved!" Now, I don't mean to make too much of a literal application of this verse to that morning's encounter but ...hey, you never know!

Of course, another application of that verse was quite obviously connected to that morning and, for that matter, to the whole range of Vital Signs Ministries. For we sincerely purpose, as Christ's stewards of the



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gospel and its attendant doctrines, to not be moved from our spiritual duty. We will seek to be unmoved by the threats of our enemies, the mocking of the world, and even the indifference of a Western Church that in our day has become much too oriented to materialism, temporal pleasure, and the ever-tempting yen to be popular. But our Lord, Who knows far better than we what is best for our lives, has a much different perspective. Note, for instance, some of the other truths from Proverbs 12 that concern our need to be faithful speakers and doers of the Word.

“The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood but the mouth of the upright will deliver them” (verse 6).

“An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips but the righteous will escape from trouble” (verse 13).

“Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil but counselors of peace have joy” (verse 20).

“The righteous is a guide to his neighbor but the way of the wicked leads them astray” (verse 26).

And finally, “In the way of righteousness is life and in its pathway there is no death” (verse 28).



You can see how closely these “wisdom teachings” connect with Vital Signs Ministries. Whether it is in front of a radio microphone or a pulpit or a classroom or...even an angry assailant who has cowardly escorted his own daughter to an abortion mill, we must not retreat from holding high the banner He has bestowed to us.

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The Relationship Between the Holy Spirit and the Word of God by Randy Alcorn

His illuminating ministry is not normally independent of hermeneutical principles.

1. The Holy Spirit's presence in the life of the reader is essential to his total understanding, appreciation, and implementation of

Scripture (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

Two corollaries must balance this:

A. Scripture is normal, logical communication. It is abnormal only in its revelatory nature, not in the manner it uses human language to communicate actual thoughts. Therefore, it is possible for the man without God's Spirit (the unbeliever) to mentally grasp the meaning of Scripture, at least in terms of its logical content.

This explains why an unbeliever can write a perceptive biblical commentary. Likewise, Mark Twain, an avid unbeliever, said, "It is not those passages of Scripture I do not understand that bother me, but those that I do understand."

Still, the man without God's Spirit cannot understand God's Word in the fullest sense, for he does not and cannot have a real appreciation of the spiritual implications of biblical truth, especially in relation to himself. He may grasp the thoughts, but he misses the spirit, the life-changing purpose behind the thoughts. In that sense he comprehends the raw concepts, but he does not truly "see." Hence, the man without the Spirit of God cannot truly understand (fully grasp or appreciate) the things of God.

B. While the Holy Spirit's presence in the life of the reader is necessary for total biblical understanding, it is not sufficient for it. The Holy Spirit is not a "cure all" for poor interpretation. He does not automatically reverse the consequences of violating hermeneutical principles.

This means that a person's spirituality has no necessary bearing on the validity of his interpretation. This is why godly people sometimes differ widely in their interpretations. "If the Holy Spirit is our teacher (1 John 2:27), why don't we all have the same

interpretation?" Apparently, because his illuminating ministry is not normally independent of interpretive principles. He works through the proper treatment of communication, not independently of it.

Suppose two men have different interpretations. One may be considerably more spiritual than the other (in fact, the other may be an unbeliever), but the godly man's interpretation may be incorrect. He is walking with God, but he fails to obey the basic laws of interpretation; so he is wrong, and the Holy Spirit does not automatically correct him.

If a physicist walks off a building, he will fall to the ground as quickly as an uneducated man. Likewise, if a godly man and biblical scholar violates interpretive principles, he will draw erroneous conclusions, as certainly as the ungodly or untrained. Neither the law of gravity nor the laws of hermeneutics play favorites. And, apparently, the Holy Spirit chooses to suspend the latter laws as infrequently as the former ones.



The bottom line is that the validity of an interpretation should not be judged by the interpreter's spirituality (or eloquence), but by the interpreter's fidelity to sound interpretive principles.

2. The Holy Spirit desires to transform and use the mind of the believer in Bible study. He does not desire to discard or bypass it.

As John Stott put it, "Your mind matters." As explained under the previous principle, God expects a thoughtful, careful human mind to discern and apply the principles of interpretation to Scripture. The concept of

responding to biblical truth “with your spirit, not your mind” (e.g., Watchman Nee, Witness Lee and “The Church”), reflects an unbiblical and dangerous dichotomy. The objectivity of biblical interpretation is easily lost in the experiences and emotions of the interpreter. My mind is not perfect, but it is useable; and as I use it in biblical study, it should be increasingly renewed and sharpened.

3. The Holy Spirit’s ministry is to shed light on “old truth” (already-revealed Scripture), not to reveal “new truth.”

It may be “new truth” to me, and in that sense a “revelation,” but look out! If it is different than what the author intended, if it’s some new message God is bringing to me, then it isn’t biblical study. “The way of the Spirit is the way of the Word.” The Spirit speaks through and in conjunction with the Word. He opens my mind to certain principles, implications, and unique applications of His truth. But the raw material the Holy Spirit uses is the revealed truth itself.

Many people have adopted a view where they are waiting for the Holy Spirit to speak, either verbally, in a vision, or through an “inner light.” They read books by people who confidently say they are speaking on God’s behalf. Emboldened, the reader may eagerly await, create, or fabricate a revelation from God. The desire to hear the Spirit speak is admirable. But the ironic truth is that the Spirit has already spoken. He has spoken in His Word.

If I expect direct revelation to me, who needs a Bible? I can simply ask God to speak, while I fail to study and absorb the vehicle through which He already has spoken. This shortcut or circumvention of direct revelation might be exciting, but it is a lazy man’s approach, and a dangerous one (I have many impulses and thoughts—how can I tell which are from God and which aren’t?).

If I would listen to the voice of the Spirit, I should “put my ear” to the Word of God. Why wait for the Spirit to speak when I have in my hands what He has already spoken?

The distance between me and God’s revelation is the distance between me and my Bible. I should prayerfully ask for the Holy Spirit’s guidance in my biblical study, but not ask Him for new revelation independent of it.

Don’t misunderstand. I believe that the Holy Spirit leads me and illuminates me every day. All I am saying is that I must weigh my subjective sense of what the Spirit is saying against the teachings of the Book which He inspired.

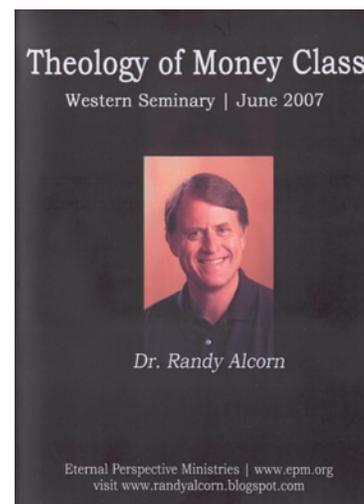


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rob people of the joy of giving?**

The Indispensable Father

My Favorite Books

**An Encounter While
Sidewalk Counseling**

**The Relationship Between the
Holy Spirit and the Word of God**

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