

eternal perspectives

SPRING/SUMMER 2020

FIXING OUR EYES ON ETERNAL REALITIES IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

INSIDE

Discovering the
Wonders of God in
the Low Tides of Life

Watch Your
(Knowledge) Diet in
the COVID-19 Crisis

The Christian Life Is a
Fight for Sight



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about

This magazine is a publication of Eternal Perspective Ministries, a Christ-centered nonprofit organization founded and directed by author Randy Alcorn. It can be read online at epm.org/magazine.

All Scripture quoted in Randy's articles are from the English Standard Version (ESV), unless otherwise noted.

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On Changing Circumstances, and What Never Changes

Over the last few months, many of us have seen life as we know it upended, changed, and rearranged due to the COVID-19 crisis. We've experienced, at times, both fear and frustration. But no matter what changes around us, some things remain the same, including our need to fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen (2 Corinthians 4:18).

In the time between when this issue of *Eternal Perspectives* went off to print and reached your mailbox (or inbox), your circumstances may have changed substantially (or perhaps not!). That's why you won't find much here on specific issues related to the COVID-19 crisis. But you *will* find timeless content that will encourage you to keep an eternal perspective in life and to trust Jesus (which is always the goal behind our magazine!). That perspective is perhaps more important than ever in times of difficulty and change, regardless of the reasons.

Our prayer is that this issue will help you affirm that "My eyes are ever on the Lord" (Psalm 25:15, NIV) and "My eyes look to you, LORD... I seek refuge in you" (Psalm 141:8, CSB). Thank you for your partnership with our ministry!

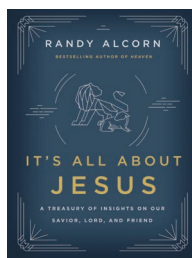


Resources to Help You Learn and Grow

Scripture tells us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). This list of online resources and books can help you go deeper in your relationship with Christ in this challenging time. See epm.org/resourcesgrow.

Coming This Fall: *It's All About Jesus*

Randy Alcorn has compiled some of the greatest words ever spoken about Jesus—words that will encourage you to love and trust and follow Him more. *It's All About Jesus* provides a wealth of powerful quotations about Jesus' character, His life, His names, and His relationships with others. (Expected release date fall 2020.)



EPM Office Closed

Because of the coronavirus outbreak, our office is temporarily closed. We won't be shipping orders until Oregon's stay-at-home mandate is lifted and it is safe for our staff to return to the office. (Due to our staff's adjusted schedule, replies to emails may be delayed. Thank you for your understanding.)

In the mean time, if you're looking to order Randy's books, new and used copies are available from Amazon. Some books, including those related to *Heaven*, can also be ordered directly from their publisher (see tyndale.com). We look forward to serving our customers again when we are able to do so!

We also encourage you to explore our website, epm.org, for many free resources, including videos, articles, and downloads.

Discovering *the Wonders of God* in the Low Tides of Life

BY RANDY ALCORN

Over the years, God has been faithful in what I call “the low tides” of life. In those times, I’ve seen Him in ways not always visible during high tides—periods of relative ease and comfort. As the wonders of underwater tide pools are only seen at low tide, so the wonders of God and depths of our need for Him can become visible to us in our own low tides.

Perhaps you, like me, have also experienced the truth of what Robert Murray M’Cheyne said: “You will never find Jesus so precious as when the world is one vast howling wilderness. Then He is like a rose blooming in the midst of the desolation, a rock rising above the storm.”

When the Bottom Drops Out

Years ago, my wife Nanci suffered through what she calls her “year of fear and free-floating anxiety that made me fall in love with God.” Nanci knew

God from childhood and trusted Him all through my lawsuits, arrests, and job loss, then through her mother’s death and other losses (and threatened ones). But that inexplicable year of her life, unrelated to any outside traumatic event, changed her. She coped by telling God, morning and night, how much she loved Him.

She has continued her habit of praise and intimacy with God that developed when daily fear and dread fell upon her. The crushing emotions of that time have departed; the sense of intimacy with her Savior remains. To this day Nanci rejoices in God’s love for her and her love for Him in ways she never would have known without that year she otherwise could describe as hellish.

Why do God’s children undergo pressures, suffering, and deadly peril? Paul answers clearly: “that we might not rely on ourselves but on God” (2 Corinthians 1:9, NIV). There’s no nearness to God without dependence on God. And nothing makes us more dependent on Him than when the bottom drops out.

When we're feeling good, too often we rush on with little thought of the God who is supposed to be our Rock and Sustainer and Comfort. He is our friend, and don't we always appreciate true friends most when we need them, in times of difficulty? As Corrie ten Boom put it, "You may never know that JESUS is all you need, until JESUS is all you have."

No Other Way

Ten months after his son was killed in a car accident, Greg Laurie told me, "What I wish is that I could have learned and grown and drawn close to the Lord just like I have, but that Christopher was still here." Greg captured it perfectly—I too wish I could have all the good God has brought me and have learned the things He has taught me through adversity, but without all that pain and loss. But it doesn't work that way, does it?

God knows we'll learn things in those low tides that we would never learn any other way. And He understands our greatest need is to know Him better and trust Him more deeply:

Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, *that he understands and knows me*, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight," declares the LORD (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

But grow in the grace and *knowledge* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Philippians 3:8-10).

Nothing is more important or joy-giving than truly knowing God, even when that knowledge comes about because of our deepest pain.

The Depths of God's Character

As we have dealt with her cancer over the past two and a half years, Nanci and I have spent time meditating on the attributes of God, rereading and listening to audiobooks such as *The Knowledge of the Holy* by A. W. Tozer, *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer, and *Trusting God* by Jerry Bridges. Our hearts have been lifted in praise as we've contemplated His holiness, grace, justice, mercy, and every facet of His being revealed to us in Scripture. While we certainly would not have chosen this "low tide," we've drawn closer to the Lord and to each other because of it.

In the midst of our suffering, God makes some of His most profound and precious self-revelations.

Perhaps He does so

because only then are

we ready to see them. I love what Calvin Miller wrote about going deep into God's character:

"...those who plumb the deep things of God discover true peace for the first time."

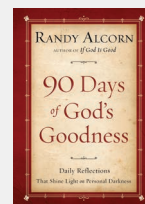
So if you're experiencing a low tide season (like many are right now), trust that God is at work in your life through these difficulties. Focus on His character, as revealed in Scripture. Look to Him and ask Him to reveal His wonders to you. Then may you say along with Scripture:

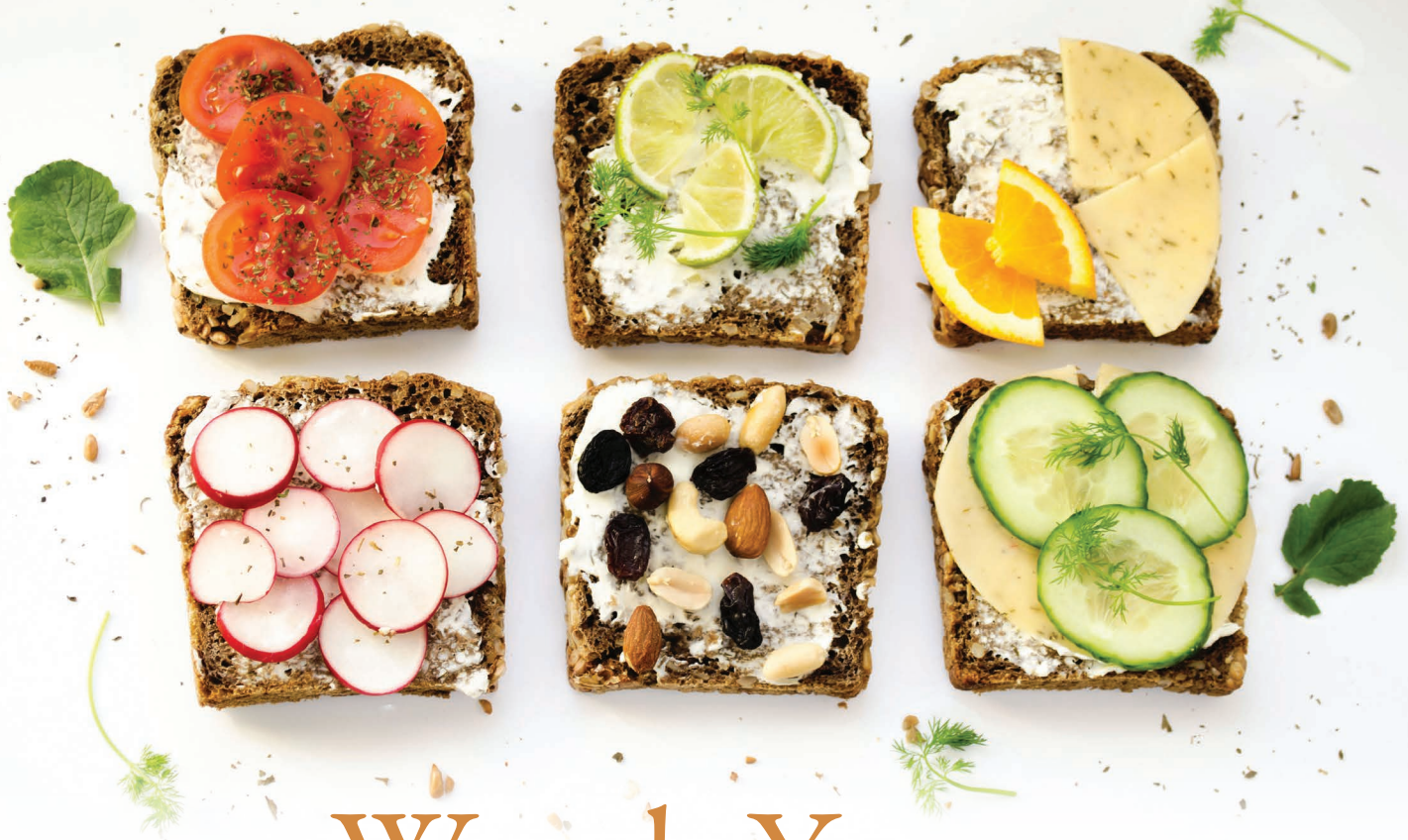
"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33). ■

Those who plumb the
deep things of God
discover true peace for
the first time.

CALVIN MILLER

For more perspectives on trusting and knowing God in suffering, see Randy's devotional *90 Days of God's Goodness* (available on Amazon Kindle).





Watch Your (*Knowledge*) Diet IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

BY BRETT MCCRACKEN

The last few weeks have removed any remaining doubt: we are living through an epistemological crisis. Among the many distressing aspects of the COVID-19 global pandemic is the stress of information overload. Everyone has something to say about it. Millions of self-proclaimed experts chime in online, crowding out or contradicting real experts. Our minds are spinning because of this article we read, that tweet thread we saw, or any number of other charts, graphs, scenarios, and projections we've picked up on our streams.

Meanwhile, the existing crisis of politicized "news" has worsened. "Alternative facts" proliferate, plenty for every side to marshal for whatever opinion they wish to perpetuate. Incessant

commentary and clickbait leave our heads spinning. When something as biologically objective as a virus becomes politicized and subject to one's own partisan interpretation, it's obvious just how post-into the post-truth era we've come.

In a world like this—with more and more information but less and less wisdom—what are we to do? How can we stay sane, mentally and spiritually healthy, and wise? A few years ago these questions led me to create "The Wisdom Pyramid," a visual aid inspired by the food pyramid but applied not to food groups but "knowledge groups." The idea—which I've since turned into a book that will be released in early 2021 by Crossway—was to help people build a knowledge diet conducive to wisdom

in a world glutted with untrustworthy sources.

A key idea in my wisdom pyramid is that social media should occupy the smallest (as in the “use sparingly” fats/oils/sweets category in the food pyramid) segment of our knowledge diet. The problem is, most of us have made this unhealthy category one of the staples of our diet. And that’s why we don’t know what, if anything, is true or trustworthy. That’s why anxiety and mental illness have been skyrocketing in recent years. Our diets are totally imbalanced.

In this article I want to apply the logic of the wisdom pyramid (see the graphic below) to our present COVID-19 moment.

SCRIPTURE

To become wise, our information diet must begin with the Bible. It must be our solid foundation, as well as the grid through which all other sources of wisdom are tested. Instead of starting your day with social media or the news, start it with the Bible. Join The Gospel Coalition in our Read the Bible initiative (tgc.org/readthebible). Immerse yourself in the eternal wisdom of God’s direct speech to us—the most trustworthy, authoritative, comforting, and illuminating voice to which we could possibly tune our ears. Does the Bible speak specifically about 21st-century pathogens like coronavirus? No. But Scripture is rife with ironclad wisdom for how we can live, love, suffer, and hope in times like this.

CHURCH

Yes, church will look different for the foreseeable future. But it has never been more important. The local church offers us groundedness in place and community, which is especially key for our sanity in a world where distant concerns and headlines can suck all our energy. Church history and tradition also offers groundedness in time, giving us the security of continuity in a world where everything is rapidly changing. Look to the church’s past to be reminded that the bride of Christ has often thrived under duress. Look to the church’s present—your local church family (necessarily virtual for the time being)—to be reminded that a strong community, where members push one another to grow into

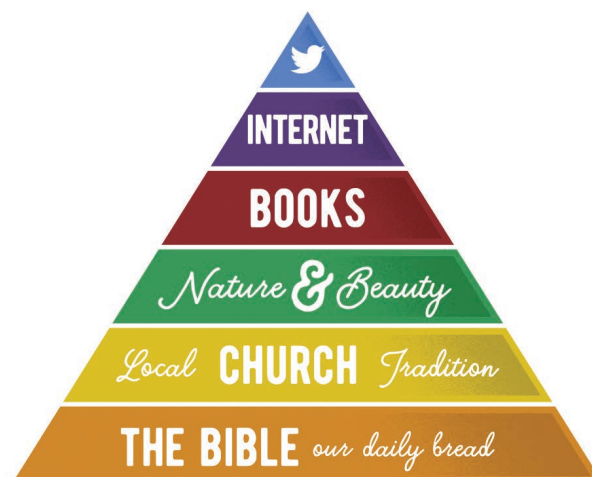
Christlikeness, is essential for our flourishing, never more than in times of isolation and fear.

NATURE

Nature is an indispensable source of wisdom and sanity in a world gone mad. There is an objectivity to nature, biology, weather, the seasons, and so forth that is crucial in a world awash in a sea of subjectivism. God’s creation offers perspective and comfort to us because it has much to communicate about his glory (Psalm 19:1), if we only listen. The problem is we are often too plugged in or cut-off from nature in the modern world; hence our declining mental health. Researchers have found that today’s excess of digital stimuli causes our brains to become overwhelmed as they filter and sort through the glut. Being in nature, by contrast, gives us fewer choices, allowing the brain’s attentional system to function better in higher order things like deep thinking and reflection. In our current crisis, then, it’s important to go outside. Get off your computer, put away your phone, and get some fresh air. Go on walks. Garden. Let the joyfully singing birds—oblivious to crashing stock markets and pandemics—teach you lessons Twitter can’t (Job 12:7).

BEAUTY

The wisdom of beauty is tied to the wisdom of Sabbath. Both feel superfluous—at best “nice-to-haves” in hectic, intense times. But therein lies their necessity. Beauty slows us down, quiets our busy minds, stills our restless souls. Beauty helps us rest



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As our world today has made painfully clear, wisdom is not the result of simply having easier access to more information. *It's not about the amount of information we have, but its quality and reliability.*



and gives us more tranquil space to contemplate, consider, and synthesize. Don't neglect beauty in a crisis! Sometimes a far better thing to do than panic shop or aimlessly scroll through Twitter is to just listen to beautiful music. That's why I created a "Songs of Comfort for Anxious Souls" playlist and a similar list of music videos. Beauty and the arts don't necessarily help solve a grievous crisis like this, but they can help us cope with it, and in time they will help humanity make sense of it.

BOOKS

In our presentist, distracted, inattentive age, books give us perspective, focus, space to reflect. Reading books—a wide variety, from different eras and places and worldviews, both fiction and nonfiction—keeps our anachronism and self-centeredness in check. They educate us, cultivate in us empathy, help us make connections across disciplines, and open up the world. In times of global crisis the temptation might be to watch CNN constantly. Don't. Read Augustine's *Confessions* instead, or a work of classic fiction. Read books that have stood the test of time, offering wisdom and help to readers across the decades and centuries. Instead of sitting in front of your computer screen during this crisis, sit down under a tree outside and read a book while listening to the birds.

INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The internet is a massive blessing in many regards, especially in how it connects us even when we are unable to get out of the house! But it's critical that in the digital age—and especially in times of heightened anxiety, fear, and misinformation—we limit our exposure to the online world. Yes, stay informed about COVID-19 (and especially the official guidance, from national and local authorities, for how you can stem its spread), but

don't immerse yourself in the news any more than you need to. Especially if you struggle with anxiety, stay off Twitter right now. Look to trusted doctors, epidemiologists, and credentialed medical experts before you look to clickbait-seeking bloggers, amateur virologists, and armchair economists. For your short-term sanity and long-term wisdom, please don't build your epistemological diet around the fleeting ephemera of social media.

As our world today has made painfully clear, wisdom is not the result of simply having easier access to more information. It's not about the amount of information we have, but its quality and reliability. Wisdom is less like a repository for knowledge than a filter for it, like a healthy kidney: retaining what is nutritious as it filters out the waste. A. W. Tozer compares wisdom to a vitamin: "It does not nourish a body in itself, but if not present, nothing will nourish the body."

There is not yet a vaccine to boost our immunity against COVID-19. But in terms of the many toxins of untruth and epistemological pathogens that make us mentally and spiritually sick, there is an immunity-boosting defense: wisdom. That's why a healthy, wisdom-building diet of knowledge and information should be a critical priority for Christians in today's uncertain world. ■

Brett McCracken is a senior editor at *The Gospel Coalition* and author of *Uncomfortable: The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian*



Community; *Gray Matters: Navigating the Space Between Legalism and Liberty*; and *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide*.

This article originally appeared on The Gospel Coalition website (thegospelcoalition.org) and is used with the author's permission.



If You Don't Really Need Your Stimulus Check, Would You Prayerfully Consider Giving It to God's Kingdom?

BY RANDY ALCORN

There are many Americans who have anticipated receiving their coronavirus stimulus check from the government because they truly need the money in order to pay bills and care for their families. But if you're in a position where this money went, or will go, into your savings account or to fund wants but not needs, I would like to make what might seem to be a radical suggestion. Would you prayerfully consider giving it all away to God's kingdom? That's what we're going to do. And if you can, please join us.

Two disclaimers: First, I'm well aware some people actually will need this money. I'm not assuming no one should spend it on themselves! Rather, I'm speaking to those who, like us, do not have such a need at this time. Second, I'm not suggesting you donate the money to EPM! Here are some ideas:

1) Your local church has probably experienced reduced giving and needs your support to continue to pay staff salaries.

2) There are many ministries, including missions organizations doing Bible translation for unreached

people groups, whose major donors (many of whom own businesses) are struggling financially due to the epidemic. To sustain these vital projects others are needed to step in as givers if they are able to do so (see illuminations.bible).

3) There are excellent Christ-centered, gospel-proclaiming ministries that are, at great expense and considerable risk, putting themselves on the frontlines by giving medical assistance in Italy, New York City, and other parts of the U.S. and the world. Samaritan's Purse (samaritanspurse.org) is among those. (For more ideas where to give your check, see EPM's list of recommended organizations at epm.org/recommended.)

A friend of our ministry sent this note:

When I heard we were getting a stimulus check of \$1,200, I realized I was in a place that I did not "need" this money. Our income had not changed that much due to the COVID-19 virus. I asked God what He would want me to do with this and when I received a giving invitation from a ministry named Kizimani, I knew instantly that was where He wanted me

to give. My husband was fully on board, of course. I immediately responded and pledged the money (knowing that my heart can change so quickly in a given moment).

I felt such joy! But I wondered, with all we have couldn't we give more? I'm still wrestling with that. I wish I could say we emptied our bank account but I'm praying God would make us pliable and that we would listen to what He wants us to do. I don't want this to turn into "look what we're doing." But I can't help wanting to let people know that this extra income is an opportunity to give to those in need.

Paul said that "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7, ESV). What keeps us from giving cheerfully? We instinctively imagine that hoarding or spending on ourselves will make us happiest. But Jesus said our greatest joy comes when we give to others: "There is more happiness in giving than in receiving" (Acts 20:35, GNT). You might have heard that verse translated "It is more blessed to give than receive," but the well-documented fact is that the Greek word *makarios* here, translated "blessed," really means "happy" or "happy-making."

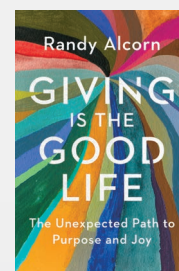
Notice what Jesus did *not* say: "Naturally, we're happier when we receive than when we give, but giving is a duty, so grit your teeth, make the sacrifice, and force yourself to give."

Money won't make us happy, but giving away money can make us profoundly happy! When we give out of love for Christ and others, we experience dramatic and lasting returns for the investments we've made—far more than if we'd kept or spent it. Therefore, it's not only receivers who come out ahead—it's givers, too.

In the novel *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury said, "Everyone must leave something behind when he dies. ...The difference between the man who just cuts lawns and a real gardener is in the touching. ...The lawn-cutter might just as well not have been there at all; the gardener will be there a lifetime."

As believers in Christ, we have the opportunity not just to tend flowers but to tend to people and leave an eternal impact, all for God's glory. May we never settle for anything less. ■

Experiencing the good life in Jesus is always possible—even in difficult times (including a pandemic). Learn more about the unexpected path to purpose and joy in Randy's book *Giving Is the Good Life* (available on Amazon Kindle).



When we give out of love for Christ and others, we experience dramatic and lasting returns for the investments we've made.

9 Ways to Pray for Your Soul

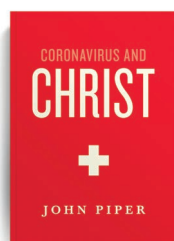
BY JOHN PIPER

Here are some ways to pray for yourself so that you're praying in sync with the way God works.

- 1 For the desire of my heart to be toward God and His Word.**
Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to gain. (Psalm 119:36)
- 2 For the eyes of my heart to be opened.**
Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law. (Psalm 119:18)
- 3 For my heart to be enlightened with these “wonders.”**
[I pray] that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened. (Ephesians 1:18)
- 4 For my heart to be united, not divided, for God.**
O Lord, I will walk in Your truth; unite my heart to fear Your name. (Psalm 86:11)
- 5 For my heart to be satisfied with God and not with the world.**
O satisfy us in the morning with Your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. (Psalm 90:14)
- 6 For strength in this joy, and endurance during the dark seasons.**
[I pray that God] would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man. (Ephesians 3:16)
- 7 For visible good deeds and works of love to others.**
[I pray that you] will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord...bearing fruit in every good work. (Colossians 1:10)
- 8 For God to be glorified.**
Hallowed be thy name. (Matthew 6:9)
- 9 In Jesus' name.**
He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? (Romans 8:32)



By John Piper. © Desiring God Foundation. Source: desiringGod.org



John Piper is founder and teacher of desiringGod.org and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. He is author of more than fifty books, and his sermons, articles, books, and more are available free of charge at desiringGod.org.

Don't miss John's new book *Coronavirus and Christ*, available for free as both an ebook and audiobook at crossway.org/coronavirus.



What If You Struggle TO FORGIVE YOURSELF for a Past Sin?

BY RANDY ALCORN

I'VE RECEIVED MESSAGES over the years from believers who say something along the lines of this: "I struggle with forgiving myself for a past sin. I've asked Christ's forgiveness for it many times but can't seem to resolve my feelings of guilt and accept God's forgiveness."

Talk Back to the Devil

If you can relate to the sentiment of this message, here's what I encourage you to do: ask yourself, "Have I accepted Christ's sacrifice on my behalf, and also confessed to God this sin?" If the answer is yes, would God on the one hand say, "I've fully

forgiven you" (the clear teaching of Scripture) but then turn around and plague you with guilt feelings when in fact He died to remove your guilt? No, obviously not. That means the source of your despair is not God but the evil one. So talk back to the devil and say, "You're right, I'm a sinner. But Christ has fully forgiven me and He is infinitely greater than you, as 1 John 4:4 says. So I will believe my Lord, not you!" (A. W. Tozer entitled one of his editorials "I talk back to the devil," and it later became the title of one of his books.)

Jesus said Satan is a liar, and when he lies he speaks his native language. Lying is what he's

best at. Satan is lying to you and saying Christ's redemptive work is not available to you in this case. Christ is the teller of truth. What does He say? "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37, NIV). "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). If we believe Satan when he says Christ's death wasn't sufficient to cover our every sin, then we are choosing to believe the most accomplished liar of all time, the one whose native language is lies.

So, have you confessed your sins to Christ? If yes, then you are forgiven. Whether or not you have doubts, whether or not you have a subjective emotional sense of "feeling forgiven" is irrelevant—the fact is, if you have done what 1 John 1:9 says, (and unless God isn't telling the truth!) you are forgiven.

We Dare Not Call God a Liar

All sins must be punished—if we don't accept Christ's punishment on our behalf, we leave ourselves to take it on. But since we have no righteousness to pay for our sins, we can never atone for them, and therefore the self-punishment can never end. Only we who are covered with the blood of Christ will escape eternal judgment for our sins, because that judgment has been laid on another whose gift of atonement we have received.

We simply aren't good enough to ever pay off our own sins. So if we choose to believe we're unforgiven after we've confessed, we say Christ's sacrifice wasn't good enough to save us by His grace, and in effect, we call God a liar.

Chuck Swindoll wrote, "By focusing on forgiving ourselves, we have taken the spotlight off of God and pointed it at us—making it doubly difficult to let go of our sin! He has forgiven us. We must simply receive that forgiveness and rest in it. That means releasing those sins we want to hold on to, refusing to revisit them in our minds, and allowing the truth of our forgiveness to cover us with His peace. Absolution from the Lord is far more powerful than absolution from oneself."

If you feel you're not worthy of God's forgiveness, you're right—none of us is worthy of His grace. If we were worthy of it, we wouldn't need it! But God showed His grace to us in that while we were yet depraved and sinful, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). He has seen us at our worst and still loves us.

Trust His Word, Not Your Feelings

Don't buy into Satan's lie that your relationship with God depends on you always doing the right thing and feeling a certain way. The devil may even try to convince you that you've lost your salvation. If so, rehearse what Scripture says. We can do absolutely nothing to earn our standing with Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). Therefore, we can do nothing to lose it. No one can pluck us out of the Father's hands (John 10:29). Our ceasing to do good works, or doing bad works, cannot move us out of His hands, simply because it is not our good works that put us there in the first place (we have no good works apart from Christ), but only the perfect work of Christ done on our behalf.

Beware of letting your feelings keep you from trusting the Lord. Otherwise you'll fall into the devil's trap and fall for his schemes, which we are commanded not to be ignorant of, so that he cannot outwit us (2 Corinthians 2:11). One of the things Satan would love to do is get you so focused on your guilt that you stop serving at church, stop witnessing, stop growing in your faith, and stop trusting what God's Word says. Since he cannot keep you from going to Heaven, now he wants to derail you and distract you from serving God. He wants to create a wedge between you and God. Do not let him do this. Ask God to help you not fall into Satan's trap.

Believe Christ and meditate on Scripture, not on how you feel, and eventually God will change how you feel. You are forgiven—eventually you'll feel forgiven, but until you do, you still are. Don't trust your intellect any more than your emotions if it is contradicting the Word of God. Don't trust anything but His Word—force your intellect to submit to it,

Christ wants you to embrace His grace and accept His empowerment to walk in the light.

ask God for help, and eventually your emotions will likely follow, but whether they do or not, the truth is still the truth. If you have sinned and confessed, you are forgiven. No sin is bigger than our Savior.

Satan wants you to be shrouded in darkness and despair, because he knows the truth will set you free (John 8:32), and he wants you in bondage. Christ, in contrast, wants you to embrace His grace and accept His empowerment to walk in the light, as He is in the light, His blood covering us from all our sins (1 John 1:7). (One clarification: the Bible teaches not only forgiveness of our sins but also consequences of our choices. Forgiveness means that God eliminates our eternal condemnation and guilt. But it does not mean that our actions in this life have no consequences on earth. Forgiven people can still contract an STD or go to jail for drunk driving, for example.)

It's All About Christ

Ultimately, refusing to forgive ourselves is an act of pride—it's making ourselves and our sins bigger than God and His grace.

Tim Keller writes in *Counterfeit Gods*, "When people say, 'I know God forgives me, but I can't forgive myself,' they mean that they have failed an idol, whose approval is more important to them than God's."

C. S. Lewis expressed a similar sentiment in one of his letters: "I think that if God forgives us we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him."

Like me, you're a wretch, an unworthy sinner. Neither of us deserves God's grace. But He gives it to us anyway—and that should make us dance for joy! So don't be self-absorbed and self-important, as if this were all about you, and you have to figure it all out and make a way. Christ has figured it all out and made the way for you. It's not about your righteousness—it's about the righteousness of Christ on your behalf (2

Corinthians 5:21). He's the One who has made us His beloved children (Romans 8:16) and called us His friends (John 15:15).

If you're still struggling, by all means get help from your pastor or a mature Christian friend or counselor. Listen to God, who died for you on the cross, not to the Enemy of God, who is telling you Christ's work on the cross wasn't good enough. Read His words of grace and forgiveness out loud, write them down, and memorize them. Choose freedom, not bondage. Don't despair, but rejoice in the grace of God. The price has been paid—it's for you to accept Christ's atonement, not try to repeat it.

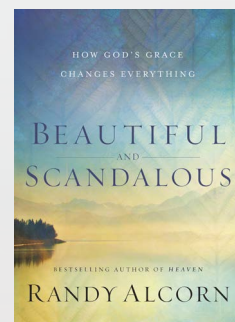
Embrace God's forgiveness. Relax. Rejoice.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoiced in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2). ■

In *Beautiful and Scandalous: How God's Grace Changes Everything* (available on Amazon Kindle), Randy offers daily meditations, Scripture readings, and inspirational quotes that will enable you to grasp more fully the grace God lavishes on you.

(This book has the same content as Randy's book *Grace: A Bigger View of God's Love*, but with an updated title, look, and cover design.)



Charles Spurgeon on the Sweetness of Tasting God's Word

When you taste honey—and Winnie the Pooh will back me up on this—you naturally want more of it. When you taste God's Words, you naturally want more of them!

While it's true that Scripture is nourishing, the thought of nourishment alone won't bring us to the table. We need to actively cultivate our taste for God and His Word, and experience its sweetness for ourselves.

A. W. Tozer wrote in *The Pursuit of God*, "The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts."

That's exactly what we're told to do in Scripture: "Taste and see that the LORD is good. How happy is the person who takes refuge in him!" (Psalm 34:8, CSB).

In the introduction to his sermon on Psalm 119:103, Charles Spurgeon encourages his listeners to actively "taste" God's Word. May we too experience the sweetness of Scripture—today and every day! —Randy Alcorn

BY CHARLES SPURGEON

"How sweet are Your Words unto my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalm 119:103).

...Do you not think that two of the words in our text are very strange? If you had written them, would you not have said, "How sweet are Your Words unto my ears"? The Psalmist says, "How sweet are Your Words unto my palate!" for that is the word in the margin. ...Are words, then, things that we can taste and eat? No, not if they are the words of man—it would take many of our words to fill a hungry belly. ...man's words are air and airy, light and



frothy. They often deceive, they mock, they awaken hopes which are never realized. But God's Words are full of substance—they are spirit, they are life, they are to be fed upon by the spiritually hungry!

Marvel not that I say this to you! It was God's Word that made us—is it any wonder that His Word should sustain us? If His Word gives life, do you wonder that His Word should also give food for that life? Marvel not, for it is written—"Man shall not live by bread, alone, but by every Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." God's Words are meat, drink, and food—and if bodies live not upon words—souls

and spirits feed upon the Words of God, and so are satisfied and full of delight! This is the language of an eater as well as of a hearer—of one who heard the words and then ate the words.

...I like this way of describing the reception of God's Word as a matter of eating, for a man cannot eat God's Word without living! He that takes it into himself must live thereby. There is a reality about the faith which eats. There is a something there most sure which contains the elements of salvation, for tasting is a spiritual sense which implies

nearness. You can hear at a great distance by means of the telephone, but, somehow, I do not think that anyone will invent an electrical taster. Nobody knows what may be done, but I fancy that I shall never be able to eat anything in New York. I think that we shall hardly ever reach such a triumph of science

as that! There will always have to be a measure of nearness if we are to taste anything and so it is with God's Word. If we hear it, it is music in the ears, but still it may seem to be at a distance from us. We may not get a grip and grasp of it—but if we taste it—that means that we really have it here within ourselves! Then has it come very near to us and we enter into fellowship with the God who gave it.

This idea of tasting God's Word contains the thought of receptiveness. A man may hear a thing and, as we say, it goes in one ear and out the other,

and so it often does, but that which a man gets into his mouth till he tastes it, and it is sweet to his palate, well, he has truly received that. If it is sweet to him, he will not do as they who have something lukewarm, which is objectionable, which they cast

away out of their mouth. But when he finds it palatable, the sweetness will make him keep it where it is till he swallows it down into his inward parts.

...Tasting is also a personal matter.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen," said Mark Anthony, in his oration over the body of Caesar, "lend me your ears!" And

they go to be lent and numbers of people hear for others. But tasting, surely, is a personal business—there is no possibility of my eating for you! If you choose to starve yourself by a long fast of 50 days, so you must. If I were to sit down and industriously attempt to eat your portion of food, and my own, too, it would not help you in the least! You must eat for yourselves and there is no knowing the value of God's Word till you eat it for yourself. You must personally believe it, personally trust to it, personally receive it into your innermost spirit, or else you cannot know anything about its power to bless and to sustain! I do pray, dear Friends, that we may, every one of us, tonight, understand what the Psalmist meant when he spoke of tasting God's Words and of finding them sweeter than honey to his mouth. ■

Excerpted from "The Best Christmas Fare," Sermon #2340. Delivered on Lord's Day evening, December 24, 1893, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.



There is no knowing the value of God's Word till you eat it for yourself.

Updates on Nanci Alcorn

The Alcorns deeply appreciate your continued prayers for Nanci's health. She had several tests done in early May. Read the latest updates at caringbridge.org/visit/nancialcorn.

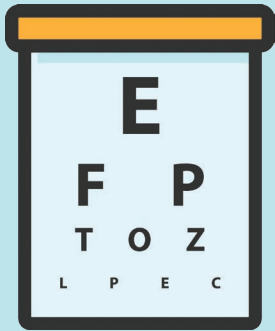


Mincaye Is with Jesus

On April 28, Mincaye, the former warrior who in 1956 speared to death two of the five missionary martyrs in Ecuador, and who later came to faith, went to be with Jesus. Don't miss Randy's tribute at epm.org/mincaye.



THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS A FIGHT



FOR SIGHT

BY JASON MEYER

The Bible includes some stories that seem downright strange. Have you ever read something in Scripture and wondered how on earth it applies to our lives today? The Old Testament book of 2 Kings contains a story so archaic it seems unlikely that we could relate to it nowadays.

At the time the story took place, the nation of Syria was warring against Israel. Every time the king of Syria planned an attack, Israel's king would somehow find out about his plans and thwart them. Exasperated, the Syrian king declared there must have been a spy in his ranks and demanded to know who it was. His servant informed him that there was indeed a spy, but he wasn't from Syria. Instead, the informant was the prophet Elisha, who had been receiving visions of the king's secret plans directly from God and then relaying that information to Israel's king.

As you can imagine, the king of Syria did not take the news well.

One morning, as the prophet Elisha and his servant got up, they encountered a very troubling situation.

When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" (2 Kings 6:15)

Elisha and his servant were going about their regular daily lives when suddenly they were surrounded by one of the greatest armies in the ancient world, the Syrian army. The imbalance of the situation seems almost comical. What were two people against an entire army? When Elisha's servant looked at the Syrian chariots and horses surrounding him, he cried out in despair at their seemingly

hopeless scenario. As we read this story, it's easy to think, "That's interesting enough. But what is the application for me today? I don't have a hostile army forming a siege circle around my home."

You and I may not be staring down an enemy force from a foreign country, but we do face seemingly hopeless circumstances every day. In 2 Kings 6, the dynamics of discouragement are almost perfectly on display. Like Elisha and his servant, we sometimes find ourselves surrounded by difficulties, and that is when the servant's question becomes our question: "What shall we do?" We share the same problem: We are blind to the big picture.

The Danger of Discouragement

Discouragement is a liar, and the danger is that sometimes these lies are hard to spot because of their sophisticated packaging. The distorted lies of discouragement come to us like a wolf in sheep's clothing. They are clothed in half truths because they only get part of the picture right. Here is where the story of Elisha's servant and the Syrian army makes its most powerful point. The servant was right about the reasons to lose heart. There was an army of reasons to be discouraged—literally! But the servant saw only half the story.

Elisha told his despondent servant to look at their circumstances again. He needed to be confronted with the full truth so he wouldn't be discouraged by the half-truth. Elisha told him,

"Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold,

the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:16–17)

Discouragement can be defeated only when the full truth of everything that is for us confronts and conquers the half truth of fear and despair. When the full truth vanquishes those half-truths, our hearts will be comforted and strengthened. In other words, we can "take heart."

This is the way the Bible speaks of discouragement again and again and again. It does not pretend that the problems are not there; it simply declares that there is more to see. The Christian life is a fight for sight. If all we see is what is against us, the shackles of discouragement will keep us confined to a prison of despair. When we see that the One who is for us is greater than all that is against us, our chains will fall off and our hearts will be free to hope again. Losing heart is easy when the chains of discouragement close tightly around our hearts and choke our hope. But we can take heart when the chains are gone and our hearts set free once again. Seeing the bigger picture is the key to unlocking the chains of despair.

The Dynamic of Discouragement

We lose heart when we believe half-truths because they remind us that there are *real* reasons to become discouraged. Those troubling facts feel compelling when they stand on their own, and it is easy to become overwhelmed by discouragement because the reasons are real.

I have bad news and good news to share. The bad news is that our fallen world is full of many reasons to lose heart, and they are easy to see. It does not take any special skill to recognize the reasons in



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our everyday lives. It does not take faith to become discouraged. We just have to take a look at some of the problems that plague us. Discouragement is a heaviness of heart that comes from feeling the weight of those problems piling up on us.

But here is the good news: The reasons to take heart are greater than the reasons to lose heart! In other words, we can defeat discouragement because it is only a half-truth. Encouragement does not come from wishful thinking but from seeing the totality of truth and embracing what is truly real.

Let's go back to the story of Elisha and his servant. When they were surrounded by enemies, Elisha said, "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (2 Kings 6:16). In the same way, encouragement comes when we are convinced that the reasons to take heart are greater than the reasons to lose heart. When we recognize that these reasons are superior, we can take up the biblical battle cry of hope: "We do not lose heart" (2 Cor. 4:1).

Now I have more bad news. Not only are the reasons to lose heart easy to see but the reasons to take heart are harder to see. Vanquishing discouragement is never automatic nor easy. It is a hard-fought *fight for sight*. But why is it hard? Like Elisha's servant, we are often painfully aware of what is *against* us but woefully unaware of all that is *for* us. Even though the reasons to take heart are greater than the reasons to lose heart, the former can often only be seen "by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7).

This is where good news comes back into the picture. The reasons to take heart are actually *more* real than the reasons to lose heart. Now I know that it usually feels the opposite because the things that are physically visible can feel more solid or substantial than the promises of God. But the Bible contradicts that half-truth with this full truth: "The things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). The things we tangibly see are temporary. The things we cannot see—eternal things—are ultimately more solid and substantial and lasting.

The bottom line in the fight for sight is this: We lose heart when we lose sight of all that we have in Jesus.

When we lose sight of Jesus, we see only half the picture, we believe half-truths, and we are robbed of hope. But as believers, we are called to fight back.

If we belong to Christ, how can we lose our hope? Christ in us is "the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). The fallen world we live in has many reasons to lose heart, but Jesus says to you and to me, "Take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). ■

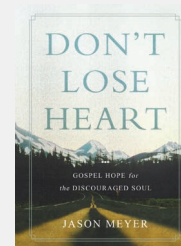
Excerpted from the introduction of Don't Lose Heart: Gospel Hope for the Discouraged Soul by Jason Meyer, Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, copyright 2019. Used by permission.

Jason Meyer is pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church and associate professor of New Testament at Bethlehem College and Seminary.

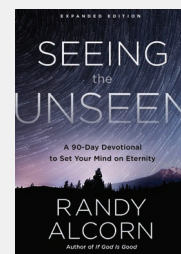


Resources to Help You See Beyond (available on Amazon Kindle)

In *Don't Lose Heart*, Jason Meyer shows us that though the reasons for discouragement seem strong, the reasons we have to take heart and hold on to hope are stronger yet.



Randy Alcorn's 90-day devotional *Seeing the Unseen* equips and inspires readers to live with a right view of eternity that can shape the way we think and live today.



In *Competing Spectacles: Treasuring Christ in the Media Age*, Tony Reinke shares the beauty of Christ, a Greater Spectacle—capable of centering our souls and filling our hearts.





Christians, It's Time to Go on the Offensive

BY REBECCA MCLAUGHLIN

When it comes to giving reasons for our faith, we Christians are playing far too defensive a game.

We've believed that Christianity is declining. It isn't. We've assumed Christianity can't stand up in the university. It can. Too many of us think Christianity is threatened by diversity. It never has been. And too few of us think Christian sexual ethics are sustainable in the modern world. They are. On these and many other fronts, we have conceded far more ground to secularism than it deserves.

But we've also been playing too aggressive a game. We've majored on point-scoring and culture-warring, when the Bible calls us to "gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). We've propagated weak arguments without listening to real experts. And we've blindly stepped out into cultural traffic, rather than taking our lead from those with the credibility to speak.

If we are to be faithful in this cultural moment, we must be neither retreaters nor attackers, neither

(needlessly) defensive nor (faithlessly) aggressive. Instead, we must go on a "gentle offensive." Here are five things that will help.

1. Know Our Moment

Forty years ago, sociologists predicted religious decline. Modernization had bred secularization in Western Europe, and where Western Europe led (so the logic went), the rest of the world would follow.

But that prophecy failed.

In the West, religious identification has certainly declined and looks set to decline further. But the rest of the world has not followed suit. In the next 40 years, Christianity is set to remain the world's largest belief system, claiming 32 percent of the global population (a 1 percent increase over its current share), while Islam is expected to grow substantially from 24 percent to 31 percent. Meanwhile, the portion of humanity that does *not* identify with any particular religion (including atheists, agnostics, and "nones") is set

to *decline* from 16 percent to 13 percent. Indeed, if China swings toward Christianity as rapidly as some experts expect, the non-religious category could shrink even more, and the proportion of Christians would increase.

To the surprise of many in the Western academy, the question for the next generation is not, “How soon will religion die out?” but “Christianity or Islam?”

2. Level the Playing Field

The New Atheists claimed that religion poisons everything. This warps the thinking of our secular friends, but it doesn’t line up with the facts. A large body of empirical evidence shows that regular religious participation is good for individuals and good for society. In America, those who attend church weekly or more are 20 percent to 30 percent less likely to die over a 15-year period, suffer less from depression, are less likely to commit suicide, and are less likely to divorce.

We all know the health benefits of exercise, quitting smoking, and eating more fruits and vegetables. But it turns out that going to church at least once a week is correlated with equivalently good health outcomes to any of these! And the benefits extend to others. In his 2018 book *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?*, philosopher Christian Miller observes that “literally hundreds of studies” link religious participation with better moral outcomes. In North America, regular service attenders donate 3.5 times the money given by their nonreligious counterparts per year and volunteer more than twice as much. Meanwhile, levels of domestic violence in a U.S. sample were almost twice as high for men who didn’t attend church versus those who attended once a week or more, and religious participation has also been linked to lower rates for 43 other crimes.

Many of these effects aren’t exclusive to Christianity, but they give the lie to the idea that secularization is good for society. Why have we heard a different message? As atheist social psychologist Jonathan Haidt warns, “You can’t use the New Atheists as your guide” on these matters, because “the new atheists conduct biased reviews of the literature and conclude

that there is no good evidence on any benefits except the health benefits of religion.”

3. Reclaim Diversity

Celebration of diversity is a core secular liberal value. But when it comes to diversity, the cards are firmly in our hands. Christianity is the most culturally and ethnically diverse belief system in the world. Further, as we look at the demographics of Christianity in North America, two themes stand out. First, people of color are *far* more likely to be religious than whites are. Across every index of Christian participation, black Americans poll substantially higher than whites—often by as much as 20 percentage points—while Latino Americans are also more likely than whites to identify as Christians. Second, in line with global trends, women are significantly more likely to be active Christians than men

are. The gender gap is smaller than the racial gap. Black American men are more religious than white American women. But it’s

Christianity was fiercely multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural from the start, and the church throughout history has always been majority-female.

still significant. Conversely, among American atheists white men are overrepresented.

And this is no accident. Christianity was fiercely multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural from the start, and the church throughout history has always been majority-female. When we think about our cultural moment, therefore, we need to stop lamenting how the church is being eroded by demographic forces beyond our control, and start celebrating what God is doing through his glorious mixed-multitude of a church.

4. Field Our A-Team

Twenty-five years ago, historian Mark Noll wrote these damning words: “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.” For much of the 20th century, many evangelicals saw the simplicity of the

gospel as a mandate for intellectual laziness. But Christianity is the greatest intellectual movement in all of history! Christians invented the university. Schools like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Yale were founded specifically to glorify God. Even academic disciplines that are supposed to have discredited faith turn out to have deep Christian roots: For example, the modern scientific method was first developed by Christians *because* they believed in a Creator God.

When it comes to the university, we're not begging for a place at the table or trying to chop it up for firewood. We're pulling up a chair to the table we built. But in the academic realm, as in other areas, we need to seek out our experts—the thousands of Christian professors whom God has raised up in universities—and learn from their work and let them lead.

Likewise, when it comes to other areas of cultural engagement, we need to let our most credible voices speak. In a world where Christians are seen as homophobic bigots, we need to get behind the biblically faithful, same-sex-attracted Christians God has raised up to speak for and to his church. In a world where Christianity is dismissed as a white man's religion, we need to get behind biblically faithful men and women of color. And in a world where Christianity is thought to denigrate women, we need to get behind biblically faithful, rhetorically gifted women—particularly on issues like abortion, where being pro-life is often (falsely) equated with being anti-women.

None of this means bowing to identity politics. Truth is truth, whoever is voicing it. But God has raised up leaders whose voices can be heard. We need to field our A-team in the public square. And the rest of us must follow their lead.

5. Raise Our Game

When Jesus first preached, the harvest was plentiful. The same is true in America today. Encouragingly, much of the trumpeted decline within American Christianity has come from nominal or theologically liberal denominations—while more full-blooded, evangelical faith persists. Moreover, while many Americans have switched from identifying as Christian to identifying with no religion, the traffic

is by no means one-way. A recent study found that while 80 percent of those raised Protestant in the United States continued to identify as Protestant in adulthood, only 60 percent of those raised non-religious kept away from religion when they grew up, with many converting to Christianity. Being non-religious turns out to be quite hard to sustain over multiple generations.

Rather than batten down the hatches, therefore, we need to go on an evangelism offensive. The secular consensus is crumbling, and we must humbly make the most of every opportunity—in the dorm room, at the bus stop, or by the water cooler. But we need to raise our game.

To be sure, if we're sharing the gospel faithfully, we'll often meet rejection. Only God can open blinded eyes, and we must pray like people's lives depend on it—because they do. But we must ensure it's the stumbling block of *Christ* our friends trip on, not an obstacle course of myths we could dispel.

So let's field our A-team and go on an evangelism offensive with diligence, gentleness, and respect. Because Jesus is no relic from the ancient world. He is our modern world's best hope. ■

Rebecca McLaughlin holds a PhD from Cambridge University and a theology degree from Oak Hill seminary in London. She is a regular writer for The Gospel Coalition and author of Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion.



This article originally appeared on The Gospel Coalition website (thegospelcoalition.org) and is used with the author's permission.

During the COVID-19 crisis, Rebecca is curating a weekly email series featuring Christian professors at leading secular universities. Her goal is to encourage and equip believers as they read about the faith and research of these professors. Sign up at rebeccamclaughlin.org/subscribe.

How Do I Clearly Share the Gospel When I Lack Confidence?

Q & A

Q I met a young man who's had a very rough life. He started a conversation with me, and eventually I asked if he knew Jesus. He said he lost his faith, but when he is lonely, he feels Jesus is the only one he can talk to. We arranged to meet weekly. How can I share the Good News with him? I'm uncertain what to say.

ANSWERED BY RANDY ALCORN

A It's great that God has given you this new relationship. I encourage you to pursue it. Pray daily for him and especially for your times together. Feeling a bit uncertain is good in that it encourages dependence on the Holy Spirit, which is exactly what you need when sharing the gospel.

Pastor Greg Laurie writes,

You might say, "I'm not qualified. I'm not gifted or talented." Do you want to know a little secret? You are just the person God is looking for. He delights to use people who aren't necessarily self-confident. Why? Because when God does something amazing through them, He is the one who gets the glory, as He should. No, you may not feel qualified or "ready." But God isn't looking for ability as much as He is availability. God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies the called!

That this young man says he talks to Jesus is good, but he needs to embrace the good news of Jesus to be on speaking terms with Him, otherwise his sin will get in the way. Once there's repentance and confession of sin, then he's free to talk to Jesus about anything and everything—if God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31).

I've had many experiences of sharing Jesus with people at schools, on planes, and on tennis courts. Some friends think I'm a natural-born evangelist. But I'm not! I find the hardest thing is choosing to open my mouth. Once I do, the Lord graciously gives me the words.

One way to approach a conversation like this is to ask someone if they think they'll go to Heaven,

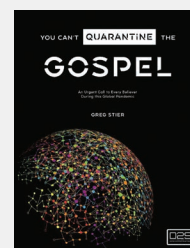


and if so, on what basis? This will cut to the core of the main issue—that Jesus is the only way to Heaven, and nothing they've done can earn their way. On the contrary, their default destination is Hell, which we all deserve, not Heaven, which we don't deserve.

You could also watch a short but right-on gospel video together on a tablet or a phone (for example, see this unconventional yet beautiful video presentation of the gospel at epm.org/gospel). Then ask what he thinks and what questions he has.

To me, there are not many joys comparable to that of leading someone to Christ and sharing His "good news of great happiness" (Luke 2:10). May God use you to clarify the gospel for this young man, and also to help you grow in your walk with Jesus by serving Him. ■

Check out the great message in *You Can't Quarantine the Gospel*, a free ebook by Greg Stier. Download it at dare2share.org/you-cant-quarantine-the-gospel.





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Reader Response to *60 Days of Happiness*:

"I'm finding this devotional to be one of the best possible books (other than the Bible) for this particular time in history. I've ordered copies to be sent to all of my family and some friends, too. I gave some out at Christmas, and one dear friend of mine says it has totally changed her view of God and life—and this is a woman whose husband was a pastor for 30 years! She was saved, but didn't seek happiness or even think about it."

Available from Amazon and Tyndale.com