HOW TO MAKE LIFE WORK



Life Hope & Truth

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Introduction

The Source of the Solutions

Too often, it seems like life isn't working right. When we are besieged with sadness, failure, money problems, health problems or relationship problems, it can feel like life is broken.

A wide variety of often-conflicting advice is out there claiming to help you fix it. But how can you know if it will work—or make things worse?

What if the One who designed human life left us instructions about how to make it all work?

We believe our Creator did provide us with solutions, practical tips and the answers we need to make our lives work as He intended. But the Bible is not really a *self*-help book—it actually gives us access to the *ultimate Help.*

This study guide is intended to assist you in finding and using the biblical principles that will make all the difference in your life—now and forever!



Chapter 1

How to Be Happy

Have you ever wondered why so few people experience true happiness and peace of mind? What about you? Are you personally filled with joy and happiness? If not, you can tap into life-changing gems of knowledge that lead to genuine joy and contentment.

We all want to be happy. Yet so many today deal with discouragement, sadness, fear and worry, which rob them of real happiness.

What can we do?

Where can we go for help?

One source of sound counsel is sorely neglected and generally overlooked.

The Creator of our bodies and minds has given us a handbook as an assured, dependable and unfailing source of knowledge. It outlines basic principles and instructions for daily living.

If applied, these guidelines will lead us into a life of lasting happiness and contentment. Rejection of these principles will undoubtedly produce heartache and unending sorrow. These biblical guidelines are not magical formulas, but practical rules of daily conduct that govern the way to happiness.

It is logical that the Creator of mankind knows what produces happiness. His instruction book, the Bible, is a source where we can discover the answers to life's most perplexing and difficult questions, including what makes us happy—and what makes us unhappy.

However, there is a challenge all of us face. One of the most difficult things for us humans is to admit when we are wrong—to confess our errors and change our thinking and actions.

Each of us must prove to ourselves that the Word of God is the foundation upon which we are to build our lives. Then it is up to us to rightly use that knowledge.

The Bible provides the answers about how to be happy

God desires that we enjoy a full, abundant life. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). He came to show mankind the path that leads to true happiness, recorded in the pages of the Bible.

What are the biblical principles that we should practice in order to produce happiness in our lives?

1. Strive to place God first in your life and obey Him

One of the keys to happiness is a willingness to live by the laws of God, beginning with the 10 Commandments. "Happy are they who are without sin in their ways, walking in the law of the Lord. Happy are they who keep his unchanging word, searching after him with all their heart" (Psalm 119:1-2, Bible in Basic English).

Furthermore, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night . . . For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (Psalm 1:1-2, 6, New Revised Standard Version).

In the New Testament the Greek word for happy is *makarios*. In most verses *makarios* is translated "blessed," but it could also be "happy." Notice Revelation 22:7, 14: "Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed [happy] is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book . . . Blessed [happy] are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city."

Obedience to God and His laws will indeed lead to eternal joy and happiness.

2. Practice the way of give

In spite of our material wealth and blessings, so many in the Western world are unhappy and discontented. It is easy to be overcome with a spirit of competition, striving to gain more and more physical things. Worrying over unpaid and ever-increasing debt can lead to a negative and unhappy state of mind.

"A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed . . . All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast. Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it" (Proverbs 15:13, 15-16, English Standard Version).

Most people feel they would be happier if only they could increase their income. But notice Acts 20:35: "I have shown you in all things that by working hard in this way we must help the weak, remembering the words that the Lord Jesus himself said, 'There is more happiness in giving than in receiving'" (Good News Translation).

Jesus Christ, who gave up His life for humanity, said, "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:38).

Material possessions are a blessing when rightly used, together with an attitude of giving and sharing. Society seems convinced that getting without giving is the way to go. However, this approach is in direct contradiction to the way God intends us to live.

It is a truism that happiness can be multiplied by dividing it with others.

3. Discover why you were born

Humans over the centuries have struggled to discover the reason for their existence. What is man, and for what

purpose was he placed on this earth? Discovering why you were born will dramatically change your life. You will begin to see that God has planned a future for each of us that is beyond our imagination. There is an exciting and glorious future that awaits us.

"But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.' But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

Our incredible potential is detailed and made plain in our booklet *God's Purpose for You: Discovering Why You Were Born*. Download a free copy, and you will come to understand the purpose of your existence and why you were placed on the earth. The information contained in this booklet will change your life forever!

And this knowledge of a glorious future will result in personal happiness and joy you have not experienced before.

4. Face up to life's trials and upsets

It is vital to understand that tests and trials are actually part of the way God develops our character. God does not enjoy seeing us suffer, but He does enjoy seeing us develop spiritual character. Experiencing trials is one way we can grow in the character traits God desires. Once we grasp this fact, we have a better chance of not allowing the ups and downs of life to get us down. We have the opportunity to turn defeats into victories because we understand and appreciate God's supreme purpose behind our trials.

The apostle Paul explained it this way: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction which is but for a moment, *is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*" (2 Corinthians 4:16-17, emphasis added throughout).

The apostle Peter said, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; *but rejoice* to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, *that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy*" (1 Peter 4:12-13).

Understanding the purpose for our trials helps us "press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14, King James Version)—with satisfaction and genuine happiness!

Helen Keller, though blind, realized that "happiness cannot come from without. It must come from within. It is not what we see and touch . . . which makes us happy; it is that which we think and feel and do, first for the other fellow and then for ourselves."

God is giving you the opportunity to learn how to be truly happy

Becoming familiar with God's promises and purpose for mankind opens a pathway for you to begin to experience happiness, joy and contentment in a way you have never understood before (1 Peter 1:3-7; 1 John 3:1-3). Believe what the Bible says about why we exist, confidently claim the promises, and look forward to a future filled with joy and happiness.

As Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it *more abundantly*" (John 10:10).

Strive to please God and look forward to the abundant life—filled with happiness!



Chapter 2

How to Be Successful

What is success, and how do we reach it? Here's how applying purpose, preparation and perseverance can help us achieve the most important things in life.

How would you answer if a job interviewer asked, "What is your definition of success?"

What about if a family member asked you? Or your minister?

For that matter, what will it take for you to consider your life a success?

Looking at all the famous quotes about success by successful people, you could conclude there are many definitions of success. It's broader than money and fame.

In fact, those with wealth and celebrity often have been burned by them and mention other things instead:

- "Success comes from knowing that you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming"—John Wooden, renowned UCLA basketball coach.
- "If you carefully consider what you want to be said of you in the funeral experience, you will find *your* definition of success"—Stephen Covey, best-selling author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.
- "I measure success by how many people love me"—billionaire and philanthropist Warren Buffett.

Boiling it all down, success is achieving the most important things in life.

And there are practical steps that lead toward success.

These keys to success have been stated and numbered various ways. As a quick memory aid, consider the three Ps: *purpose, preparation* and *perseverance.*

Purpose and passion: setting the right goals

"The secret of success is constancy of purpose"—Benjamin Disraeli.

A short book published in 1974 makes an important point in its title: *If You Don't Know Where You're Going, You'll Probably End Up Somewhere Else.*

Defining your goals—having the end in mind—is an essential starting point. You can redefine goals as you go along, but if you don't have goals, you can end up running in circles.

Every book on success has a section on goals, so instead of covering the same ground, let's focus here on identifying what God wants us to put first.

"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37; see also Matthew 6:33 and Ecclesiastes 12:13).

This doesn't immediately sound like the standard definition of success. But, actually, putting this overarching goal first brings everything else into perspective. Becoming more and more like God "is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (1 Timothy 4:8).

God does want us to enjoy life abundantly and rejoice (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10; John 10:10; Philippians 4:4). So after putting God first, we can set our other priorities, such as loving others (Matthew 22:39) and pursuing a career or calling with passion.

Learn more in our online article "Christian Priorities: Putting God First."

Preparation: growing in knowledge, understanding, skill, resourcefulness and wisdom

"Before anything else, preparation is the key to success"—Alexander Graham Bell.

Every goal requires knowledge. Develop a plan to gain the facts and information you need about how to achieve your goal. Formal education is vital, but hands-on, self-directed training is also important for taking your knowledge to the next level: understanding.

Along with understanding, we must develop the necessary skills, and that takes practice. "The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise," writes Malcolm Gladwell in *Outliers: The Story of Success.*

He quotes neurologist Daniel Levitin, "The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert—in anything" (pp. 39-40).

In support of this 10,000-hour rule, Gladwell presents examples as varied as the Beatles and Bill Gates. Those preparing for success must devote the time and practice to excel.

As we grow in mastery, we must develop the ability to find a way to overcome every challenge and obstacle that comes along. This kind of problem solving can be called resourcefulness. Creativity and outside-the-box thinking help us deal with novel or tenacious difficulties.

The Bible calls the highest level of thinking *wisdom.* In the book of Proverbs, wise King Solomon praised and personified wisdom: "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding. Exalt her, and she will promote you; she will bring you honor, when you embrace her" (Proverbs 4:7-8).

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally."

Our preparation to achieve physical goals can lead to practical, commonsense wisdom. Our spiritual goals require a different, deeper wisdom—the wisdom from above (James 3:17). God invites us to ask Him for it: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

In the same way that practicing a physical skill produces mastery, practicing obedience to God leads to greater understanding and spiritual wisdom (Psalm 111:10).

Many people can't wait to finish their education and preparation. They want to get on with achieving their goals! But in reality, learning should never end, and practice must continue throughout life. The next key helps us build on this preparation and go on to success.

Perseverance: pushing forward and sticking with it

"I'm convinced that about half of what separates successful entrepreneurs from the nonsuccessful entrepreneurs is pure perseverance"—Steve Jobs.

"Success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or learning to do"—Pelé.

You can't win the race if you quit. You can't cross the finish line if you stand still or turn back.

All the planning and preparation in the world will be worthless if you give up.

In order to persevere, we must remind ourselves of our purpose—our passion—and not let it fade. Troubles will come, so we must commit to sticking with our goals.

Our level of drive and perseverance is affected by our health and stamina. Developing good habits of exercise, diet and sleep can build a bank of health to help us face our challenges.

To be successful, we must also increase our level of diligence. The Bible says, "Diligence is man's precious possession" (Proverbs 12:27).

Successful people are known for their drive—their intensity of effort. Musician and actor Will Smith once said, "I've never really viewed myself as particularly talented. Where I excel is [my] . . . work ethic" (quoted in *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance,* p. 46). Considering his example and many others, author Angela Duckworth concludes, "When it comes to how we fare in the marathon of life, effort counts tremendously" (p. 47).

Dr. Duckworth, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and founder and CEO of Character Lab, studies the importance of grit to success. She says, "Grit is about working on something you care about so much that you're willing to stay loyal to it . . . It's doing what you love, but not just falling in love—*staying* in love" (p. 54). Her work shows how passion fuels perseverance.

One man who displayed drive and endurance was the apostle Paul, the author of much of the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 11 he lists many challenges he successfully faced in fulfilling his mission:

"In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often . . . Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches" (verses 23, 25-28).

Through all this, Paul raised up congregations, taught thousands of people and wrote a great deal of the best-selling book the world has ever known.

As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said on Oct. 29, 1941, during some of the sternest days of World War II:

"Never give in, never give in, *never, never, never, never*—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in, except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."

Diligence and perseverance are not only keys to physical success, but also—and even more so—keys to eternal spiritual success. As Peter wrote, "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:10-11).

The struggles and trials will all be forgotten. As Paul wrote, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

What does eternal success look like? David gives us this brief glimpse: "In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11). As our booklet *God's Purpose for You* shows, the Bible reveals an exciting eternal life of accomplishment as we fulfill the wonderful purpose for which God created us.

For more about the key of perseverance, see our online articles "Diligence in the Bible" and "Perseverance and the Science of Resilience: Applying Biblical Principles in Trials."

For more about success, see "Humility: The Surprising Key to Lasting Success."



Chapter 3

How to Achieve the Adulting Milestones

Moving from our teens to adulthood can be daunting, with many life-altering decisions and responsibilities. Here is a sequence that can lead to success.

Building anything—whether a home or a life—can be difficult. But with proper planning any difficult task can be made simpler, even if we can't quite foresee exactly how it will all turn out in the end.

Take, for instance, building a house. Specific steps must be followed in a specific sequence. Generally speaking, you would:

1. Find a location.
2. Inspect it to see if it's fit for building.
3. Purchase the property.
4. Develop a design and budget.
5. Obtain the necessary permits.
6. Hire a builder.
7. Lay the foundation.
8. Frame the walls.
9. Install the roof.
10. Work on the interior.

Just imagine building a house in the wrong order. It would be silly to start step 9—the roof—without having done the earlier steps!

So why do many people approach life by doing things in the wrong sequence?

The success sequence

God does things in an orderly fashion and teaches us to also do things in order (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). Long ago God's Word laid out the principles that lead to a more fulfilling and successful life. Modern research backs up the success sequence taught in the Bible.

The Millennial Success Sequence, published in 2017 by Wendy Wang and W. Bradford Wilcox for the Institute for Family Studies, describes a sequence of life events that leads to success in "adulting"—that is, the process of becoming a responsible grown-up. It gives modern statistical evidence of truths that our society once accepted as conventional wisdom.

The Millennial Success Sequence reports that 97 percent of Millennials who followed what it calls the "success sequence"—that is, who get an education, find work, marry, then have children, *in that order*—are not in poverty by the time they reach their prime young adult years (ages 28-34).

Failing to perform this sequence in the correct order results in difficulties in life and makes a life of poverty more likely.

(If you have already made mistakes, see our online article "From Failure to Success" for help in turning things around.)

Get an education

"An investment in knowledge pays the best interest"—Benjamin Franklin.

A wise person prepares a plan and the means of steady income before building a home and family (Proverbs 24:27). In our modern world education is a foundational part of the plan. Whether it takes the form of a degree from a higher education institution or an apprenticeship in a trade, education leads to a better job, higher earnings, better health, reduced stress, and greater social and psychological skills.

On the other hand, leaving high school before graduating will close doors to many occupations and can limit you to low-skilled jobs. Not only that, you will likely have the added stress of needing more than one job just to make ends meet. Not getting a proper education will likely result in a life of poverty.

And it can close doors not only for employment opportunities but also on the marriage front. Fairy tales like to portray marriage across socioeconomic classes—Aladdin weds Princess Jasmine, Cinderella marries Prince Charming—but in reality, these are few and far between.

A wise person seeks out knowledge and how to apply it based on God's Word (Proverbs 18:15; John 17:17). Education is a key to living a more successful and happier life. Young people should seek the best possible education they can access and achieve.

Work, and work hard

"A dream doesn't become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination and hard work"—Colin Powell.

We live in a world of instant everything; everything is at our fingertips—except success. That comes only through work, and hard work at that.

Take, for instance, the basketball star Michael Jordan. He was so good that he made success look easy. But behind his success was a lot of hard work.

In his early years failing to make his high school varsity team taught him valuable lessons. He said, "I think that not making the varsity team drove me to really work at my game, and also taught me that if you set goals, and work hard to achieve them, the hard work can pay off."

So he practiced, practiced and practiced, and he practiced hard, just like he would play the game. Years later he became one of the greatest basketball players ever.

King Solomon's comparison of the lazy worker with the hard worker shows how our actions affect our outcomes: laziness leads to poverty; hard work leads to wealth (Proverbs 10:4). If we do poor work, we can't expect success in life, but hard work and diligence will lead us there—especially when we choose our work wisely, according to God's standards.

Marriage

At one time marriage was the norm for young people, but now there are more singles than married people in this age group.

Millennials are more likely than older generations to delay both marriage and parenthood, and the most likely to live together with a partner before or instead of marrying.

So why are people postponing or skipping marriage? Some are looking for the right person; some are no longer married due to death or divorce; and some feel the responsibilities and risks of marriage are too overwhelming. Living together is seen as an acceptable alternative, as are casual hook-ups.

God says otherwise. Though the Bible does not require marriage or marrying by a certain age, it does tell us that marriage should come before sex and having children.

The Bible shows that marriage, if done right, can be a wonderful blessing. Marriages fail for a number of reasons, including poor financial management, abuse, interference from others, immaturity, violence, anger, unfaithfulness, jealousy and irresponsibility. God's way requires maturity, which minimizes those risks.

To learn more about the problems that come from living together before marriage, read our online articles "Living Together Before Marriage" and "Is Cohabitation Before Marriage a Good Idea?"

Only then have children

"We may not be able to prepare the future for our children, but we can at least prepare our children for the future"—Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The report shows that Millennials who followed the sequence by having children within marriage were the most successful. Unfortunately, the increasing trend is to have children before or outside of marriage. A third of Millennials aged 28 to 34 have had a baby outside of or before marriage (up from 20 percent of the Baby Boomer generation). And if you look at just those with children, the percentage goes up to 55 percent.

According to the report, young men and women who had a baby first are much more likely to be poor—28 percent of young adults who had a baby before or without getting married are in poverty, compared with just 5 percent of their peers who married first.

Today's norm is to have sex, move in together, get pregnant and become financially entangled before being wed. This pitfall of doing things in the wrong order leads to unhappiness and poverty.

The missing element is the commitment for life that comes with marriage. God designed sex to be a bond between partners who are married, and He intended children to be raised within that stable family.

The process of changing to follow Him makes true success possible.

There is much joy to be found in a committed, loving marriage (Proverbs 5:18-19) with children being a reward from God (Psalm 127:3).

Another step to permanent success

This success sequence can lead us to a temporary success, but to achieve permanent success, another step is needed. The report was unable to pick up this step, since it must be spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:10-11). This step is the ultimate adult decision: bringing God into our lives.

When God's laws and way of life guide our walk in every aspect of life, we can find ultimate, eternal success. Even if we have made mistakes in our lives—even if we have not followed the success sequence—the process of changing to follow Him makes true success possible.

To learn more, visit the Life, Hope & Truth website and read "What Is Conversion?"



Chapter 4

How to Make Wise Decisions

We are shaped by our choices, and some have life-or-death consequences. This Christian decision-making process can help us make wise decisions.

Decisions come in all shapes and sizes.

Every day we face decisions about what to eat, whether to exercise, how to use our time. Over the years these regular decisions generally become habits, and we don't think much about them. If we have guided these small decisions well from the start, we don't really have to worry about them.

When we haven't been making wise decisions, however, even these seemingly small choices can blossom into serious bad habits like procrastination or an unhealthy lifestyle.

We also fairly regularly run into larger decisions that may have even bigger immediate and long-term consequences. What will we study? Where will we live? Who will we marry? What church will we go to?

Then there are the moral choices we are faced with. Will we cheat on our taxes? Will we turn down the drugs we are offered? Will we allow ourselves to be pulled in by the soft porn we stumble across?

How will we deal with the issues that involve ethical decision-making?

Steps for making good decisions

Whatever type of decision we face, there are biblical principles that can help us make better decisions.

For example, when a Christian recognizes a bad habit or faces a moral choice, he or she can apply God's command to always choose His way:

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

The steps below can help with these decisions, and also with so many other decisions that don't have an easy, right-or-wrong answer.

So, where does the Christian decision-making process start?

1. Direction from God

As Christians, our overall direction in life is determined by our commitment to God, and we must remember to ask Him to direct our lives.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

How does God direct us? Through the wisdom He gives us in the Bible and through wise biblical counsel from His servants.

All of our decisions are to be in harmony with God's laws and His plan (these major subjects are discussed in more detail in our free booklets *God's 10 Commandments* and *From Holidays to Holy Days: God's Plan for You*).

We should pray for God's guidance and study the Bible to see what it says about the decision we are facing. Many helpful principles are presented in the book of Proverbs, for example; it's a book designed to teach us prudence and understanding and the wisdom to make good decisions (Proverbs 1:1-4). It all starts with understanding how much greater God is than we are. This reverence for God is known as the fear of the LORD (verse 7).

As we study the Bible, we should act on what we learn. We should discard any choices that we discover would compromise with God's laws.

Sometimes it is a simple matter to know what decision to make—simply because only one choice would allow us to obey God.

But most of our decisions are not that clear-cut. Sometimes there are several good choices, and sometimes none of the choices are morally wrong. The following biblical decision-making steps can help us make wise decisions in these cases.

2. Define the problem or opportunity

When our problem seems fuzzy, it can be very difficult to come up with a solid solution. Sometimes it can be helpful to look at the problem from many angles in order to clearly define it.

What caused the problem to erupt at this time and in this way? Who is affected by it? If other people are involved in causing the problem, why? What do they get out of it?

If your decision is an opportunity, what exactly do you get by choosing it? What do you lose if you don't choose it?

3. Dig out the relevant information

We have already discussed looking for the related passages in the Bible. We also need to search out the pertinent facts about the specific problem or opportunity.

Many search tools are available in our information age, and it can be helpful to explore everything from the library to the Internet. Look for reputable sources with relevant expertise. Be sure to put all the information you gather through the filters of fact-checking and biblical truth.

Art Markman, in his book *Smart Thinking,* writes, "It is important to know what you know and to know what you don't know. As it turns out, it is also important to know who knows what you don't know" (2012, p. 103).

The Bible advises, "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14). Different people will likely have different information and different perspectives that can give you a broader understanding of the situation.

> "In the multitude of counselors there is safety."

To learn more about how to seek wise counsel when facing decisions, read our online blog post "In a Multitude of Counselors There Is Safety."

As Dr. Markman also writes, "It is not always easy to see the hidden assumptions that you are making when solving difficult problems. For this reason, it is helpful to engage other people to help you during problem solving . . . to help you evaluate it" (p. 201).

4. Determine the alternatives

With all the facts in hand, you can begin brainstorming various options that could solve the problem or best deal with the opportunity.

Combining and concentrating on all the information gained from the previous steps should give us several possible choices.

Depending on the situation, it can be valuable to explore some outside-the-box solutions. This is especially true when none of the obvious options seem that good. Throwing around creative ideas and trying to see possible connections to seemingly unrelated fields can help you generate additional options.

How long should we spend on this step? That depends on our deadline and on understanding our own personality.

Some of us might be tempted to cut short this stage in the interest of reaching closure as soon as possible. This can be a problem if we don't have enough options to pick a good one.

Others might be tempted to continue in this stage for too long, out of fear that the perfect solution will be missed. This, too, can be a problem if we put off a decision too long and perhaps miss the deadline.

At some point, we have to decide we have enough options and move on to step 5 in the decision-making process.

5. Deliberate

Weigh the options, including the option of doing nothing. One often-overlooked factor to weigh is how much each option will help you grow in knowledge, skill or character. Make lists of pros and cons for each option. Weed out the worst ideas and carefully examine the best ones.

This is a principle that Jesus Christ advised His followers to apply:

"For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it" (Luke 14:28). Whether deciding to commit our lives to God in baptism or to remodel our kitchen, we need to count the cost and weigh the options.

Wise King Solomon also pointed out the importance of looking ahead to foresee the possible results of our decisions: "A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished" (Proverbs 22:3).

This process of deliberating the pros and cons, counting costs and foreseeing future dangers and opportunities should prepare us for the next step in the Christian decision-making process.

6. Decide

With all the research and preparation, this part should be easier. Another prayer for guidance and additional consultation with advisers can give us the confidence to make a wise decision.

When facing hard decisions between two options that seem equally good, here are some additional factors to consider:

- Trust your gut. If you pick the option you feel best about, you are less likely to second-guess yourself. If your gut doesn't give you the answer, then:
- Trust your closest adviser/cheerleader. He or she will be there to support the choice you made. If your closest adviser is also unsure, then:

- Choose the option that leaves you the most options. If you're not sure, don't burn bridges. Though it's good to be committed to your decision so you don't sabotage yourself, there will be times when it's okay to reexamine your decision and change course.

7. Do

Take action. Don't dillydally, but implement your decision decisively.

If we have followed these steps carefully and put the decision into practice diligently, we will likely be happy with the results.

God gives this encouragement to those who seek His will and follow His way: "'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we may boldly say: 'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5-6).

When we make a decision to follow God's way and His law, we don't have to look back.

But with a physical decision that isn't a matter of right and wrong, it is not bad to reassess the choice when necessary and adjust course.

Doing so can be a wise decision too.



Chapter 5

How to Manage Your Time

Time management is a booming business—everyone wants to get more done and control time wasters. But for Christians the need to manage time is even more urgent.

Time management experts and philosophers are fond of reminding us that our time *is* our life. Whatever controls our time controls our life.

Most of us deal with some of these feelings at times:

- "I can't get everything done!"
- "I am a slave to the clock—I can't even take a breather!"
- "I am busy all the time, but I never feel like I'm getting the important things done!"
- "With so many pressing priorities, it can be hard to know what to do next."
- "When I take a day off, time just seems to slip away, and I feel like it was a wasted day."

We face different time challenges, but generally we all have the same desire: to make the best use of our time to accomplish the things we feel are truly important. We want to make good decisions in order to be truly successful.

The thing that makes Christian time management different is the source of what we consider important. That source is God. So a good starting place is to consider how God looks at time and what He wants us to learn from time management.

God and time

God inhabits eternity (Isaiah 57:15). Since He created time, the mind-boggling truth is that He was around forever before time even existed!

To try to help us get a little of God's perspective, the Bible says, "With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8). God is unrestricted by time.

But though God is not controlled by time the way we humans are, He still puts great emphasis on it. He is always punctual—He always acts at the right time (even though to us humans it may seem like we have to wait a long time). He also has set aside certain times that He has blessed—for our benefit. These are designed to teach us important lessons and to reveal His plan to us.

God tells us the Sabbath and His seven annual festivals are set apart and are His feasts (Exodus 20:8-11; Leviticus 23:2-4; for more about these meaningful holy times, download our free booklets *The Sabbath: A Neglected Gift From God* and *From Holidays to Holy Days: God's Plan for You*).

God created time as a tool. We were put in this universe of time to learn many lessons and to develop the character of God. Christian time management means learning to use time as God wants us to use it.

Christian time management tips

God wants us to become His children—to be like Him (Hebrews 2:10; 1 John 3:1-3)!

To become more like God, we need to learn to have His priorities. We need to learn to use those priorities to produce a plan for improving our lives and aligning them with God's plan. And we need to put those plans into action. God's priorities and plans always produce results, and so can ours.

Time management tip #1: Priorities

God reveals to us what is truly most important in life. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

The Kingdom of God is the perfect government of God that will bring peace and plenty to this earth when Jesus Christ returns. We must be preparing for that time now.

Seeking God's righteousness means striving to live the right way—obeying God's beneficial laws that are based on God's love.

The end of Matthew 6:33 reveals an amazing thing about God's priorities. If we put what God says is important first, the other things we need and want will be added to us as well!

But if we put money and things as equal to or higher priority than God's Kingdom, in the long run we will have neither.

We can't take charge of our time without clearly defining our priorities. We must schedule what matters most first, or it will be pushed out by the hundreds of urgent and persistent things that come at us each week.

"To master time management is to set priorities among your goals. There is never enough time to do everything, but there is always enough time to do what is important," says leadership expert Lolly Daskal ("Master Time Management From Inside Out").

Our priorities become more real when we write them down as goals and rank them in order of importance. But goals can be just so much "someday I'll" thinking unless we take the next step. We need a plan to get from "Someday Isle" to success.

Time management tip #2: Planning

The Bible reveals a God who is a Planner. And He wants us to be planners too. We need long-range plans, annual plans and daily plans—and probably several plans in between.

Why plan? Lolly Daskal explains that planning our time "is not about filling every moment with busy work, but rather organizing our time around what is important . . . Planning for how to spend your time enables you to work far more efficiently than figuring it out as you go. What is planned happens, because planning leads to action."

Daily schedule planning

Let's look at planning at its most immediate level. Based on God's priorities, what does He want us to put into our schedule for each day?

- Plan time for God. This includes time for praying to God (study Psalm 55:17 and 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and our article "How to Pray"). He also wants us to study His Bible daily, as the Bereans did (see Acts 17:11 and our article "How to Study the Bible").
- Plan time for family and friends. Relationships take a commitment to spend time together. For example, God commands parents to spend time teaching their children (Ephesians 6:4; Deuteronomy 6:7).
- Plan time for work. The Fourth Commandment tells us that work should take place during the first six days of the week so that we will be ready to obey the command to not work on the seventh day (Exodus 20:8-11).
- Plan time for health: eating a balanced diet and getting enough sleep and exercise.
- Plan time for household chores and maintenance. (Don't be like the guy in Proverbs 24:30-34!)
- Plan time for learning. The Bible extols the importance of continued lifelong learning: "A wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel" (Proverbs 1:5).
- Plan time for rest and recreation. Jesus took His disciples away from the crowds at times to try to reduce the stress and be rejuvenated (Mark 6:31).

Considering these priorities can help us adjust our daily routine. Things that we do daily at certain times can become habits, and thus easier to do consistently. Having these top priorities recorded in our daily schedule will make our weekly and daily planning easier.

Then specific things that need to be done can be plugged into our calendar for specific days. Many people find it helpful to plan out the week ahead. Then the next week they can assess anything that still needs to be done, and reschedule those things for the next week.

It's important to prioritize the most important as well as the most urgent things.

Whether you use a physical calendar and daily schedule template, or an online calendar program, it's important to prioritize the most important as well as the most urgent things. Many people find they cannot get everything they need and want to do done in a day, but planning by priority

can help us feel satisfied that we are doing things in the right order.

The best priorities and plans in the world, though, are worthless if they aren't put into practice.

Time management tip #3: Perform with urgency and diligence

To implement our planned schedule requires constant motivation, focus and persistence. To choose the truly important, we must wisely act, not just react to the urgent things that come at us.

God gives us a number of reminders and prods to help us see the urgency of practicing our priorities and plans.

He tells us to count our days—to recognize how short life is and how precious every day is. That should lead us to make full use of our time. The apostle Paul encourages us to "walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15-16).

God wants us to recognize that every minute counts and should be used in a godly way. God is diligent, and He wants us to learn diligence (see our online article "Diligence in the Bible") and avoid laziness (Proverbs 12:24, 27; 13:4).

He even wants us to use our leisure time wisely. (For more specific ideas on avoiding pitfalls and properly using leisure time, see our online article "What Do You Do in Your Free Time?")

What does the Bible say about time wasting?

God is not against recreation, relaxation and pleasurable activities at the right time and in the right balance. But He warns against the dangers of letting these things crowd out the top priorities. Here are some passages about letting the pursuit of pleasure and ease control our lives:

- "He who loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich" (Proverbs 21:17).
- "He who tills his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows frivolity will have poverty enough!" (Proverbs 28:19).
- "The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing; but the soul of the diligent shall be made rich" (Proverbs 13:4).
- "The lazy man will not plow because of winter; he will beg during harvest and have nothing" (Proverbs 20:4).
- "I said in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure'; but surely, this also was vanity" (Ecclesiastes 2:1).

Time management tip #4: Act now!

Don't just read this article, perhaps agree with parts of it, and then do nothing! Begin planning time in your schedule this week to examine your priorities and to begin to make a plan to align your time management with God's priorities.

A good place to start is to learn more about the most important priority. Read "Seek First the Kingdom of God" today.

You may also be interested in these related articles:

- "The Busyness Trap."
- "5 Ways to Refresh Yourself When You Don't Have Time."



Chapter 6

How to Manage Your Personal Finances

Money affects every aspect of our lives, and God's financial principles can help us gain control and find peace of mind.

Our personal finances influence much of what we think about, talk about and do day in and day out. Often we're worrying about whether we'll have enough money to make ends meet, pay for an unexpected expense or retire. Some people become obsessed about amassing their fortunes and turn into workaholics. Some people's mood changes, depending on what the stock market is doing or how many bills are outstanding.

Our finances affect where we live, our work schedules, what we do with our free time, and on and on.

So it's not surprising that the Bible—the owner's manual for living—has a great deal to say about money.

What follows are six biblical personal finance principles, along with some elaboration from professional financial consultants.

1. Follow a budget

The Bible doesn't use the term *budgeting,* yet it offers clear direction on the importance of such planning. Simply put, a budget is a written plan to track and control income and expenses.

Proverbs 27:23 says, "Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds." Put in modern terms, we need to be aware of how we're using our income, so we can know whether we need to make adjustments in our spending.

"Budgeting helps us avoid impulsive and unnecessary spending, live within our means, and prepare for future needs," explains Bill Gustafson, associate professor emeritus at Texas Tech University School of Financial Planning. "If we don't carefully plan our finances and direct them where to go, we will one day find ourselves broke."

To set up your household budget, figure out how much you spend each month for different categories (such as housing, food, transportation, entertainment, clothing, medical, etc.), and compare that to your monthly income. If your expenses are more than your income, you will need to cut out unnecessary purchases.

Once you've established your budget, use either a ledger or a budgeting program on the computer to start tracking your monthly expenses. "If you get to the point where there's no more money left for the month in a particular category, stop spending," Dr. Gustafson says. "It's going to take some determination to do this, but it's a necessary step if you're going to get your finances under control."

For more on budgeting, see our online article "The Bible, Budgeting and You." It includes a downloadable sample outline budget.

2. Tithe faithfully

The top priority on our income, before we do anything else with it, should be God's tithes. God says in Malachi 3:10, "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house."

A tithe is 10 percent of a person's "increase" (Deuteronomy 14:22), which is given to support the ministry and work of the Church. When we tithe, we show God that we are putting Him first in our lives.

Certainly God doesn't *need* our money. Everything we have ultimately belongs to Him (Exodus 19:5). The real beneficiaries of tithing are those of us writing the checks. In the last part of Malachi 3:10, God makes the promise that when we faithfully tithe, He will "open . . . the windows of heaven and pour out . . . such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it."

The blessings can be physical or spiritual. Financial expert Dave Ramsey explains in his blog that tithing teaches us to be good stewards of what God has given us and to live unselfishly. This can lead to improved household finances and can help us become better spouses, friends, relatives, employees and employers.

Tithing can also help us learn to trust God more fully and build a closer relationship with Him. Often people who tithe can think back on times when—at least on paper—it didn't look like they could afford to tithe. Yet they did and had enough—sometimes even more than enough—for their physical needs.

One person put it this way: "Tithing has helped me to stay more focused on God, to not just look at the 'facts' from a human perspective, and to remember we can always count on God in all situations."

3. Avoid unnecessary borrowing

The Bible warns against the use of debt. Proverbs 22:7 states, "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender." If you become burdened with a heavy load of debt, in essence you've become a slave to your creditors. You no longer have the freedom to decide how to spend your paycheck because you're obligated to meet those debts.

The way to keep debt in check is to be careful about buying on credit. "Only borrow for purchases that will increase or hold their value, such as home or college tuition," advises Erica Sandberg, a San Francisco–based money management consultant. "Don't take out high-interest loans for nonessential items that are likely to depreciate quickly, such as new automobiles, clothing, furniture, appliances or jewelry."

Tithing can also help us learn to trust God more fully and build a closer relationship with Him.

According to LendingTree.com, in March 2026 the average credit card interest rate in the United States was almost 24 percent. This means you'll pay close to $240 in interest annually on every $1,000 of debt. If you let the balance carry over month after month, you can quickly end up owing far more than the original price of your purchases.

Erica Sandberg recommends using credit cards only if you are able to pay the full balance on the statement each month, so you don't have to pay any interest. If you have a lot of outstanding revolving debt, this should be paid off

as quickly as possible, starting with the credit card that has the highest interest rate.

4. Save up before spending

Financial planners generally suggest saving at least 10 percent of your income every month. Have three different accounts: short-term savings for major purchases (such as new household furnishings or vehicle repairs), long-term savings (for your retirement or children's college tuition) and an emergency fund (in case of a job layoff or large unexpected expense).

"Saving up money before making a purchase is one of the smartest ways to keep out of financial trouble," says Dr. Gustafson. "By having money set aside for 'big ticket' items, you won't be tempted to use credit cards to pay for them."

This is another biblically based financial principle. Proverbs 21:20 says, "Be sensible and store up precious treasures—don't waste them like a fool" (Contemporary English Version). Proverbs 6:6-8 describes the ant, who saves during a time of plenty for a time when there will be need. We, too, should save now for future expenses.

5. Give to others

Everything we have—our money, physical assets, jobs and even the ability to earn money—comes from God (Ecclesiastes 5:18-19). After meeting our own needs, He wants us to share some of what we've been given with others.

In Acts 20:35 Paul quotes Jesus as saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." We should give unconditionally—even when the recipients cannot repay us (Luke 14:12-14). That could mean donating to charity, buying someone a gift, having people over to dinner or buying food for a homeless person.

While we need to exercise wisdom in how much to give, we shouldn't be so tight with our money that we're reluctant to part with any of it. As with tithing, God blesses us when we're generous (Luke 6:38; 2 Corinthians 9:6).

When we have the desire to share, God gives us the means to do so.

Of course, not everyone has the same financial means. We may genuinely be struggling monetarily. But even then, we can still give of the time, talents or other nonfinancial assets that God has provided for us. The point is, God wants us to use what He has blessed us with so we can be a blessing to others, not just so we can fulfill our own needs and desires.

6. Put your confidence in God, not in your finances

When it comes to finances, people often go from one extreme to another. If our bank accounts, retirement portfolios and home values are increasing, we might start trusting in them. When we're facing a job layoff, stock market losses or unplanned expenses, we may worry anxiously. Neither extreme is the biblical approach.

The Bible makes it clear that true security can be found only in God (1 Timothy 6:17) and that trusting in riches will destroy us (Proverbs 11:28). Our wealth and possessions are temporary and can easily be wiped out in an instant, perhaps through theft, accidents or natural disasters.

If we're struggling with our finances, we must remember that God is our refuge, and that He cares for those who trust in Him (Nahum 1:7). We shouldn't be anxious about money problems (Philippians 4:6). We must do our part—to not overspend, but to save and invest our money in what has eternal value. The rest is in God's hands. If we're seeking God's Kingdom first and foremost, we can be assured that God will provide for our physical needs (Matthew 6:25-34).

By committing to these financial principles, we will benefit from improved finances and financial peace of mind. There may be less tension about money at home and a better connection among family members as well.

Most important, we will learn to trust God more fully, develop a deeper appreciation for His purpose for us and build a closer relationship with Him.



Chapter 7

How to Be Healthier: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Wellness

In a world overwhelmed by health challenges, could Scripture offer the clarity and healing we've been missing?

Each day brings new headlines: outbreaks of foodborne illness, heated debates over diet trends, growing concerns about mysterious ingredients and much more.

These headlines reflect our culture's growing preoccupation with the food we eat and how it impacts our health and well-being. Today debates over food and health dominate social media feeds and political discourse like never before. The verdict is in: People are sick of being sick.

Unsurprisingly, consumer skepticism is on the rise as more people demand better for themselves and their families and challenge the status quo when it comes to food quality, ingredients and sourcing. In light of these growing frustrations, many have chosen to take matters into their own hands by embarking on a quest to transform their health and address the root cause of many chronic health issues.

Setting debates and politics aside, the desire to steward one's health is not only responsible—it's biblical. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that our bodies are a temple and that we are to treat them as such. But this isn't all the Bible has to say in regard to our health.

God's Word also contains an array of tried-and-true laws and principles concerning our physical, mental and spiritual health. These divine laws and principles allow us to take a proactive approach, preventing many health problems *before* they arise. And when our health does suffer, Scripture also reveals the true source of all healing.

This doesn't mean that there aren't solid health principles to be learned from research and sources outside the Bible. There certainly are. However, the health guidance given in God's Word should be our foundation.

Though commonly overlooked and frequently dismissed, the Bible is truly an indispensable resource for those seeking to live happier, healthier lives. Keep reading to discover the valuable insights the Bible has to offer.

Biblical principles for healthy living: Clean and unclean meats

When it comes to improving our health, food is a crucial component. And while the Internet offers a plethora of advice regarding which foods to eat and which to avoid, the Bible also has a great deal to say about which foods are suitable for consumption—and which are not.

For instance, Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are dedicated to defining which meats God deems as clean (permissible for consumption) and which He deems as unclean (not intended for human consumption).

Though many of the animals listed are not commonly eaten in most cultures, there are a few that should catch our attention, such as pork and shellfish.

Interestingly, even though God does not provide a specific reason for deeming a particular animal unclean, science often helps fill in the gaps. As it turns out, pigs and shellfish share a common trait: both are scavengers that consume waste.

While these animals clearly play an important role within their respective ecosystems, they weren't designed to be consumed by humans.

What does the New Testament really say about clean and unclean meats?

While God's laws concerning clean and unclean meats are profound, they are often dismissed. In an effort to remove any obligation to keep this aspect of God's law, many twist various passages in the New Testament—or take them entirely out of context—to claim these laws were abolished.

But, upon closer examination, we find that this simply isn't true. God designed these laws for our benefit, and He never intended for them to be removed.

The following articles from our Life, Hope & Truth website address some of the most commonly cited verses in support of this argument: "Acts 10: Did Peter's Vision Abolish the Clean and Unclean Laws?" "Did Jesus Cleanse All Meats?" and "1 Timothy 4:1-5: Does It Abolish the Law of Clean and Unclean Meats?"

Avoiding fat and blood

In addition to distinguishing between clean and unclean animals, the Bible also specifies which *parts* of an animal are permissible to eat, and which are not. Leviticus 3:17 and 7:22-27 clearly state that, although most of a clean animal can be eaten, the fat and the blood are strictly prohibited.

While this prohibition may seem a bit odd, research reveals potential health risks associated with each. For instance, consuming the blood of an animal puts us at risk for exposure to blood-borne pathogens, while eating fat increases our likelihood of developing cardiovascular disease over time.

Moderation

The Bible also underscores the importance of balance in food and drink.

For example, in the first-century world with its uncertain water sources, Paul advised Timothy, "Use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities" (1 Timothy 5:23). However, the Bible also warns us numerous

times about the dangers of drunkenness and alcohol abuse (Ephesians 5:18; Romans 13:13).

Sanitation laws

In our modern age, it's easy to overlook just how vital rules and regulations regarding sanitation and hygiene are in abating and preventing sickness. After all, many of us live in countries where these systems have been in place for our entire lives.

But this wasn't the case in the ancient world. The knowledge that God provided Israel through His law was ahead of its time and laid the groundwork for many modern sanitation practices, such as waste disposal, handwashing, quarantine and more (Deuteronomy 23:12-14; Leviticus chapters 11-15).

Movement and exercise

The Bible doesn't emphasize physical exercise extensively, likely because most people throughout history automatically got a lot of exercise through their work and daily chores (though this is no longer true in many nations today). However, the Bible does acknowledge its value in maintaining health and strength. For instance, 1 Timothy 4:8 highlights that, while godliness is paramount, physical training is also of value.

> In order to be truly healthy, we must attend to our mental and spiritual needs as well.

While the benefits of exercise are widely recognized, finding time for it in our busy schedules can be a real challenge. Additionally, long workouts and costly gym memberships aren't practical for many of us. But this shouldn't discourage us.

According to an article by the Mayo Clinic, "Physical activity doesn't need to be complicated. Something as simple as a daily brisk walk can help you live a healthier life."

The article goes on to list a number of health benefits we can glean simply from walking, such as improved cardiovascular fitness, stronger bones, improved muscle endurance, strengthened immune system and much more.

Mental and spiritual health

Thus far, we've focused on physical health. But this is only half the picture. In order to be truly healthy, we must attend to our mental and spiritual needs as well. Unfortunately, this is where society's recommendations come up short. Though there is a great deal of advice available regarding how to improve our mental health, most resources fail to mention the most important factor of all—our connection with our Creator.

In Proverbs 4:20-22, King Solomon shared wisdom he received from God: "Give attention to my words . . . for they are life to those who find them, and health to all their flesh."

God's Word offers benefits that extend beyond the physical. When we are overwhelmed with the stresses of life or burdened with anxieties, delving into the Bible can grant us peace of mind (Isaiah 26:3), relief from anxiety (Psalm 94:19; Philippians 4:6-7) and encouragement (Psalm 119:50) in a way that nothing else can.

God our Healer

Spending time studying God's Word comes with an additional benefit—it reveals God's role as our Healer (Psalm 103:2-3; James 5:14-15).

We have a responsibility to follow God's laws to the best of our ability, but even our best efforts won't guarantee us perfect health over the course of our lives. When we do inevitably encounter health challenges, we can be comforted by God's promise: "I am the LORD who heals you" (Exodus 15:26).

Health and healing in the Kingdom of God

For many, the pursuit of better health feels like an uphill battle, often overshadowed by the state of the world around us. After all, what's the point of striving to eat well when the quality of our food is so often compromised? How can we reclaim our health when the very environment we live in seems to be working against us?

These are valid concerns. Humanity is indeed facing the consequences of ignoring God's laws (Leviticus 26:14-16). But that doesn't mean that our efforts are in vain. There is hope.

When Jesus Christ returns, the whole world will experience God's miraculous healing (Isaiah 35:5-6). Even the land will be restored, equipping it to support human life the way God intended (Isaiah 51:3; Joel 2:22-24).

Fearfully and wonderfully made

By embracing the principles found in the Bible, we can take meaningful steps toward a happier, healthier and more fulfilling life. In doing so, we grow in our appreciation for the God who created us, cares for us and continually sustains us. Never forget that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

May the day come soon when the entire world can share in God's blessing of true, lasting health.



Chapter 8

How to Build Biblical Friendships

The Bible shows what we should look for in a friend–which is also what we should be as a godly friend. Here are six characteristics.

We live in a world where friendship is often defined as our friends and followers on social networking sites. We interact with others by posting vacation photos and updates about our kids' accomplishments, and sharing recipes and animal videos. But while these things can help us stay connected on some level, they're hardly the building blocks of a close relationship.

Feelings of loneliness can be an issue for people of all ages, even when they have lots of online connections and people around them. (See more in our online article "The Loneliness Epidemic.")

In many ways, our modern lifestyles actually work against friendship. Just about everyone is overbusy, overstretched and overscheduled. Between work, classes, household chores and family commitments, there isn't a lot of time left to develop or nurture friendships. Small talk with coworkers or text messages to say "hi" may be all we manage to fit in.

To be sure, even brief interactions can brighten our day. Yet God created us to need more than just superficial social ties. We need true, biblical friendships.

Biblical friendships

This is the kind of companionship Solomon described in Ecclesiastes 4:9, 11-12. He wrote, "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor . . . Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm . . . Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him."

True friends stay by our sides not only to have fun, but also to support and motivate us as we run the race God has set before us. There can be a shared commitment to God's way of life and a desire to please and glorify Him by how we live our lives. That is the essence of biblical companionship.

What makes these friendships so precious? It comes down to the following six characteristics.

1. Unconditional love

We've probably all encountered people who stick around only when it's convenient or when they're getting what they want out of the relationship. Nevertheless, Proverbs 17:17 says, "A friend loves at all times." True friends choose to focus on what they can *give* to each other, rather than on what they might *get*.

There's a security in this kind of friendship—to know someone's not going to give up on us—even when we might not always be pleasant to be around.

The ultimate example of unconditional love is Jesus Christ, who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). He voluntarily laid down His life for the benefit of unworthy mankind. If we are to have biblical friendships, we must do the same. We must love others self-sacrificially, whether or not it's deserved and without expecting anything in return.

2. Support during trials

Very often, our natural inclination is to stay clear of people who are facing difficult circumstances. Why? "We're afraid sometimes to enter into others' pain because we know it's possible we might say the wrong thing or we might not have the right answers. But mostly, I think, we're afraid of the burden," writes Christine Hoover in *Messy Beautiful Friendship* (2017). She calls adversity the "litmus test of friendship" because it asks us to "willingly enter someone else's pain."

The second part of Proverbs 17:17 states that "a brother is born for adversity." True friends are willing to endure discomfort so they can be there for each other when needed.

This might mean being a good listener to someone who needs to talk, praying or fasting about another's situation, sending notes of encouragement, providing practical help like supplying meals, or simply sitting quietly with a hurting friend who may not want to talk but still doesn't want to be alone. When we show this kind of support, we can't help but feel more bonded together.

3. Genuine happiness for each other's successes

Romans 12:15 says to "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." Sharing another's pain isn't something people typically want to do, but the first half of this verse can be just as unnatural. Many times in our dog-eat-dog world, people find themselves competing with friends, sinking to envy if a companion one-ups them.

In contrast, godly friends rejoice in each other's achievements, successes and blessings. Each person wants the other to do well, even if it means being outshined by him or her. Godly friends find true happiness in each other's happiness, always cheering the other on to do his or her very best.

4. Edifying conversations

It's a blessing to have friends we can get together with, and afterward feel uplifted, refreshed and motivated to tackle new challenges. That is the way godly friends affect us.

Godly friends engage in meaningful conversations to clarify and deepen their understanding of God's Word (Proverbs 27:17; Malachi 3:16).

It's not that everything said has to be deep or profound. But with a true, biblical friendship, it never seems awkward to talk about God's plan and what He is doing in our lives.

5. Gentle correction

True friends will go a step further and offer sincere, loving correction when it's called for. "This gentle honesty is something that sets true friendships apart from superficial ones," notes Mary Halpin, a clinical psychologist in Deerfield, Illinois. "A more casual friend probably won't risk saying something that might upset you. But a real friend will be willing to bring these issues up, not to judge or belittle you, but out of genuine concern."

Proverbs 27:5-6 tells us, "Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed. Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful." Godly friends will tell you if you are making a serious mistake in your life—even if it stings a bit. We all have blind spots, and sometimes we need another set of spiritual eyes to help us stay on the right path.

Should we point out every little fault or idiosyncrasy of our friends? No, of course not. Usually our close friends are willing to overlook our flaws, and that's something we can be thankful for. However, when what we're doing is negatively impacting our spiritual lives or the people we love, that's a different matter. True friends will confront us and urge us to change direction.

6. Time together

In order to support others, we have to be aware of what's going on in their lives. We can't possibly know what other people's struggles, concerns, challenges, hopes and dreams are if we don't make the time to engage in real conversations with them.

"There may be people you know who you really like, but if you don't spend quality, one-on-one time with them, you're never going to move from a 'casual connection' to something more meaningful," Dr. Halpin says.

Granted, life may be crazy busy. Still, most of us can probably find more time for friends just by being more intentional about it. Even if all we can manage is one in-depth conversation every couple months, it can still go a long way in maintaining close connections.

It's not that casual or purely social friendships don't matter; they do. The point is that if you don't also have biblically based friendships, you are missing out. God wants us to experience friendships that inspire and encourage us to persevere and grow. And it's a two-way street; friendships also give us the opportunity to support and enrich the lives of our friends.

We are going to face challenges and trials, make mistakes, fall short and feel discouraged at times. It is our close friendships with others in the faith, along with our foundational relationship with God, that help get us through life's ups and downs.



Chapter 9

How to Have Better Relationships

Why do some relationships sour and end? What principles can we glean from the Bible to preserve or heal our relationships with family and friends?

The state of human relationships today is generally poor. No matter the level—whether head of state to head of state, nation to nation or person to person—there are many examples of strained and broken relationships.

Person against person

In the United States, it has sadly become routine to hear of disgruntled employees shooting their supervisors and fellow employees. And then there are the mass shootings at schools, shopping centers and movie theaters orchestrated by angry and mentally disturbed individuals.

Internationally, bullying, stalking, kidnapping and street violence are all symptoms of our damaged world.

At home, in the intimate personal relationships found in marriage, many husbands and wives struggle to get along. A high percentage of marriages end in divorce, and millions of other couples (many with children) break up without ever making the commitment of marriage.

Dissecting a breakup

Since we humans have had plenty of experience with bad relationships, it is actually quite easy to document and even predict the progressive steps that generally occur as relationships go bad.

At the earliest stages of conflict, little disagreements are glossed over or ignored. Eventually something happens that evokes anger and frustration, which moves the relationship into the conflict stage.

As the conflict progresses, both parties experience hostile feelings and negative communication from the other. At this stage, many share their side of the disagreement with others and look for consolation from them. The relationship comes to an end after one or both individuals decide that the pain and dissatisfaction make it no longer worth continuing the relationship. Although this progression can be stopped at any stage, too often the process runs its course to the end.

For a more detailed explanation of how marriage relationships fail, see the sidebar "The Process of Conflict." Although this sidebar describes what happens as marriages fail, the process is similar in the breakdown of other types of relationships.

Steps that heal and preserve

Although there are occasions when relationships must regrettably end (see the sidebar "When to End a Friendship"), many can be saved, healed and preserved by following principles revealed to us in the Bible. Here are seven keys to better relationships:

The Process of Conflict

1. ***The Latent Stage:*** Negative feelings are not brought out in the open and discussed, and frustration and dissatisfaction increase.
2. ***The Trigger Stage:*** The triggering event is often small and seemingly unrelated to the outpouring of anger and frustration that come out.
3. ***The Clash Stage:*** Pent-up frustrations and irritations pour out. This is often a surprise to the other partner who didn't realize the depth of the feelings. This clash can lead to resolution, avoidance or simply continuing in a state of conflict.
4. ***The Increase-of-Conflict Stage:*** The conflict begins to spread to other areas of life. Hostile criticisms and disparaging remarks cause anger and bitterness to grow. Each person feels rejected and threatened. There is less willingness to accept blame and more willingness to blame the other person. In some cases, one partner will try to make himself or herself feel more adequate by tearing down the other.
5. ***The Search-for-Allies Stage:*** Each partner tries to find allies who will support him or her and agree that the other person is the cause of the problem. Some couples use their children as allies in order to hurt one another. Intimate problems are discussed with friends and relatives as each one seeks allies. The two become more hostile to each other and less willing to compromise.
6. ***The Search-for-Alternate-Sources-of-Gratification Stage:*** If the conflict continues, the hostility becomes so great and the satisfaction so small that one or both partners may begin to look for emotional fulfillment outside of the relationship. Some seek fulfillment through children, work, hobbies, community service, etc. Married couples may fall into or seek extramarital relationships. The emotional investment in the relationship is greatly reduced.
7. ***The Dissolution Stage:*** The last stage of an unresolved conflict is the breakup of the relationship. One or both partners reach the point where they are unwilling to continue to put up with the situation.

This downward spiral can be stopped at any stage, but it will take awareness and work, as described in the accompanying article. (Source: Nick Stinnett, James Walters and Evelyn Kaye, *Relationships in Marriage and the Family*, second edition, 1984, pp. 191-192.)

Key No. 1: Don't raise your voice. The Bible says that a "soft answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1). When discussions turn into yelling matches, people's opinions are not changed. Instead, they are hardened, and people feel justified in their own position because of the other person's behavior.

Key No. 2: Always tell the truth. Although it has become common for people to routinely lie, if your friend realizes that you don't always speak the truth, he or she will never know whether to believe what you say. Relationships are built on trust, and when one party lies, trust is undermined. Focusing on this point, Paul told the Ephesians to put "away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor'" (Ephesians 4:25).

Key No. 3: Always show respect. While we may not appreciate or agree with someone's opinions or actions, we still need to show respect to the person. We may not understand all that went into a person's decision, or the person may have simply made a mistake. As Paul wrote, "Speak evil of no one" (Titus 3:2).

Key No. 4: Strive to be a gentle, peaceful person. While some people mistakenly believe such attributes are signs of weakness, they are actually keys to better relationships and reflections of godliness. Paul admonishes us: "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Romans 12:18).

James adds: "The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (James 3:17).

Key No. 5: Think before you speak. While it is tempting to quickly respond to slights and false accusations, we will do well to carefully consider our words before we speak. Will what we say help resolve the issue or only deepen a wound? Once uttered, words cannot be retracted. Even though we may apologize, the other person is still likely to remember what we said. As James wrote, "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19).

Key No. 6: Be quick to apologize and to accept an apology. Everyone makes mistakes, so be quick to apologize when you learn that you have offended someone or done something wrong.

We also need to readily accept apologies when others admit they made a mistake and apologize to us. Expounding upon this expectation, Christ said, "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

Key No. 7: Use God's Holy Spirit. The evidence of God's Spirit working within us is "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). The Holy Spirit also helps us to be sound-minded and spiritually mature (2 Timothy 1:7). If we truly "walk in the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16), these traits will characterize our actions and communication. These traits will also endear us to our friends.

Many biblical passages give practical details about how using God's Holy Spirit can help our relationships. Consider how pleasant it would be to have a friend who fully displayed the fruit of love as the apostle Paul described it:

"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Growing in that kind of love leads to the kind of healthy, beautiful relationships that God wants us to have! Other passages that can help us develop godly relationships

When to End a Friendship

Some mistakenly believe that they don't have any choice regarding their friends and that they must preserve all relationships–no matter how bad they might be. Quite to the contrary, the Bible notes that "the righteous should choose his friends carefully" (Proverbs 12:26).

While we should never end a relationship without careful thought (we don't want to embrace the throwaway mentality many have toward relationships today) or without first doing what we can to resolve the problem (Romans 12:18), there are times when ending a relationship is the appropriate course of action. Here are a few situations where such a decision may be warranted:

1. The person refuses to accept any responsibility for the problem and refuses to work with you to resolve the conflict (Matthew 18:15-17).
2. The person persistently acts in an ungodly, illegal or unethical way (Proverbs 12:26).
3. The person threatens you, engages in any form of abuse or tells you to leave (Psalm 120:7; Proverbs 22:24).

include Philippians 2:1-5 and Romans 12:9-21. Study these passages and ask for God's help to apply them.

Put these keys to work in your relationships and watch the positive results unfold. God's timeless principles always bear good fruit.



Chapter 10

How to Build a Healthy Family

The Bible has much to say about how to have a healthy family. Studying the common traits shared by successful families can help you strengthen your family.

Browse the self-help section of any bookstore or library, and you will likely find a sea of books about creating and maintaining a harmonious and healthy family life. Belonging to a loving, secure family unit is a basic human desire. Most of us can readily see the value of close family connections and healthy family dynamics.

A strong family can be a source of emotional support, love, security and protection, which makes the challenges and trials of day-to-day living easier to face. Children flourish when they feel loved, nurtured and supported by their parents and siblings. A good family life can even have positive effects on your physical and mental health, including improving blood pressure and increasing life expectancy.

Healthy families are the building blocks of society

Certainly, God wants our families to succeed and prosper. He designed the family to be the basic building block of society; thus, in order for our communities to be stable, the families that comprise them must be as well. And ultimately, God wants us to have spiritually healthy families so we can produce godly offspring (Malachi 2:15) and expand *His* family.

But while family relationships are important, we all know strong families don't "just happen." Sustaining a marriage and raising children are challenging things to do. If we want to have happy homes, we have to work hard to create them.

How to build a healthy family

One of the best ways to strengthen your family is by studying the common traits and qualities shared by successful families. When you understand what a well-functioning family unit looks like, you'll know what changes you may need to make in your own household. Here are some of the most vital characteristics of healthy families, from a biblical perspective:

1. A deep commitment to one another

Members of strong families have difficulties, disagreements, trials and troubles just as everyone else does. Their lives get frantic. They get laid off and can't find a new job. They struggle to make ends meet. Kids and parents butt heads.

What sets them apart is that they don't give up on each other when circumstances become strained or unpleasant, or when the other party disappoints them or lets them down. They have a steady and unwavering dedication to each other—a commitment to stay together—through good times and bad.

"Their relationship is not based on 'ifs' or changing circumstances," observes Ken Giese, pastor of the Fort Worth, Texas, congregation of the Church of God, a Worldwide Association (COGWA), which sponsors this publication. Rather than let hard times destroy them or their relationships, strong families work together to correct problems.

"Many times life doesn't go as smoothly as you'd like, and it's commitment that helps carry you through these tough times," adds Cecil Maranville, a retired minister for COGWA. "This is the kind of commitment that has you still loving your spouse or honoring your parents, when, from a human perspective, you could come up with reasons not to do these things."

2. Family time is a top priority

Between long workweeks, school activities and household chores, family time can be hard to come by. Still, healthy families always find time to be together, no matter how busy they think they are. They know that time spent together is crucial.

"When we spend quality time together as a family, we express by our actions that we value and care about

each other," Mr. Giese says. This makes family members feel more connected to each other and helps build and strengthen family bonds.

Family time could mean engaging in shared activities—eating meals together, playing games, going on picnics, watching sporting events, enjoying recreational activities, etc.—but it doesn't have to.

"As the Scriptures instruct us (Deuteronomy 6:7), the best time spent together is everyday casual time, without distractions like TV, music headphones, video games and smart phones," notes David Register, a longtime pastor for COGWA. "The real key to building relationships is to spend time together in all types of circumstances, including mundane, daily activities."

3. Plenty of constructive communication

Members of strong families spend a lot of time engaged in conversation with each other. "To understand each other, family members have to invest the time necessary to share their feelings, opinions, concerns and perspectives," Mr. Maranville says.

Much of their communication occurs while they are spending time together. No subject is considered off-limits. They may talk about routine topics like their weekend plans or what happened at school or work, or about the deeper, more serious issues of life. If there are particular issues affecting the family, they may plan special family meetings to discuss them.

> Expressions of love and appreciation deepen the bond between family members.

Making time for conversation is just half the equation. Healthy families also work at developing constructive communication skills. This includes learning to be open and honest, but still speaking in a loving manner (Ephesians 4:15)—focusing on the kind of conversation that builds others up rather than the type that tears them down (Ephesians 4:29); listening carefully, without distractions; and not "mind reading" or jumping to false conclusions when another person is speaking.

By practicing good communication skills, family members show they respect and are genuinely interested in each other.

4. Sincere appreciation is frequently expressed

To be a truly successful family, Mr. Maranville says it is vital not only to *feel* appreciation, but also to *express* it: "Appreciation helps motivate family members to continue to behave in a positive way toward each other. It also helps build confidence within a person, so we have the wherewithal to meet obstacles that are inevitably going to come our way."

Appreciation should be expressed frequently, both verbally and with meaningful gestures. This might be done by telling your spouse how much you enjoyed the dinner he or she prepared, or by saying "thank you" to your children after they cleaned the kitchen. These same sentiments can be expressed by leaving notes somewhere for family members to find, such as in their lunch boxes, or even sending text messages.

But appreciation shouldn't be limited to thanking others for what they do for you. Let family members know how special they are. Tell your spouse and children what qualities you most value in them. Say "I love you" often. Praise their strengths and accomplishments. Let them know you enjoy spending time with them. Done sincerely, expressions of love and appreciation deepen the bond between family members and strengthen the family unit.

5. Family members look out for each other—not just themselves

Jesus Christ taught His followers: "Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them" (Matthew 7:12). Healthy families do their best to live by this "Golden Rule." Individuals in the family consider how others will be affected when making important decisions. Before speaking, they think about whether they would want to be on the receiving end of what they're about to say.

"When we treat others, especially our family members, as we would hope and want to be treated, then we can achieve the fruits of a high-functioning family," Mr. Register says. "This should be the goal of every family: to create an atmosphere in which each family member feels loved and is inspired to work for the common family goals."

Sometimes this means sacrificing personal desires in order to encourage or support another person. A husband may forgo what he'd like to do on his day off to make his kids happy. A wife may go camping with her husband, even though it's not her idea of a fun time.

Putting the welfare of others above our own is the essence of Philippians 2:3-4, where Paul admonished us to esteem others better than ourselves and to not just seek our own interests.

6. Conflicts are resolved constructively and promptly

While you may not mean to, there may be times when you offend those closest to you or hurt their feelings.

Misunderstandings are a normal part of family life. But if the parties do not make amends with each other, they can lead to bitterness and grudges on both sides. Communication and respect then start to wane, mistrust builds, and family camaraderie disappears.

When offenses occur in healthy families, bad feelings are not allowed to fester. Conflicts are resolved quickly. The offender is willing to apologize and take responsibility for his or her mistakes. The offended person listens carefully to the perspectives of the family member with whom he or she is at odds, and is quick to forgive. They talk things out without attacking each other personally, while still addressing the issues. No one goes to bed angry (Ephesians 4:26). Each person knows the other cares about the relationship, even though they clashed on a particular issue.

If parents have wronged their children, they will take the lead in repairing the relationships. That includes being willing to apologize. Mr. Register remembers this very constructive practice from his childhood.

"My parents would occasionally come to me and let me know they were sorry for something they did or said," he recalls. "Their example helped me know that they were human and also taught me to apologize and forgive."

7. A shared spiritual commitment

Families are truly strong when family members are bound in unity by their shared relationship with God. "When individual family members learn to love God, respect His laws and biblical instructions, they will be close," Mr. Register says.

Being committed to God's way of life gives healthy families a sense of purpose and adds meaning to their lives. They have a reason to work at their relationships and are more likely to stay together. They are able to put trials and difficulties into perspective and maintain the right focus. God's Word provides guidelines for living, which will help families create a positive home life.

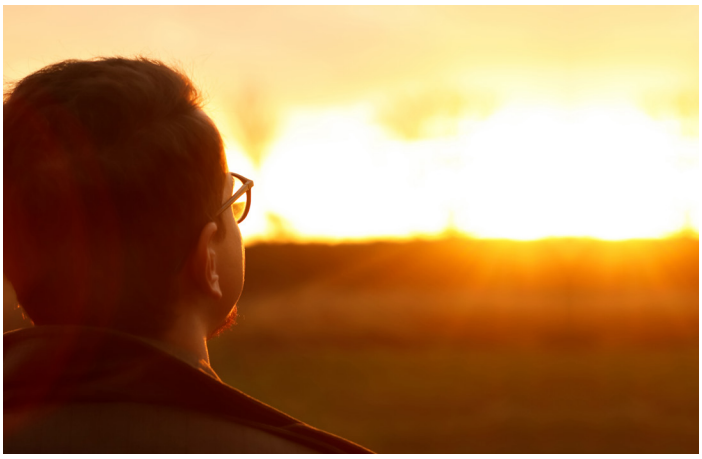
Of course, to truly be a spiritually committed family, "parents must set the pace and reflect their commitment to God in their personal lives," Mr. Giese says. If your younger kids see you studying your Bible, serving others and obeying God's commands, and if you talk about God's way of life as you go through your day-to-day activities together, they will know that God is your top priority. As they see that positive example on a daily basis, it will encourage the entire family to have that same spiritual commitment.

While each of these qualities of strong, healthy families is vital in and of itself, they all overlap, interact and reinforce each other. For example, if you spend a lot of time with your family, that enhances the communication process, which facilitates expressing appreciation. When you are committed to making a relationship work, you will see the need to forgive and resolve conflicts.

If your family falls short in any of these areas, don't despair. No human being will be a perfect parent, spouse, son, daughter or sibling. What matters most is that you are striving to have good family relationships. Understanding the traits of healthy families is the first small step.

You may also want to study biblically based educational materials on marriage and family topics (see the "Relationships" section of the Life, Hope & Truth website). Plan family meetings to discuss areas that need to be addressed. And most important, ask God for His help and guidance so you function better as a family.

It will take determination, commitment and effort on your part. But in the end you will have a healthy family—and that is definitely something worth working for.



Chapter 11

How to Discover the Real Purpose of Life

Why were you born? We all hope that our lives have meaning, though most are still searching for the purpose of life. What does God intend for us and our future?

Many of us keep ourselves so busy between work, chores and our leisure activities that there's really little time to think deep thoughts about the meaning of life.

But occasionally, somewhere in the back of our minds, we have a nagging feeling that there must be something more. There must be a purpose for our lives—something we were meant to be or accomplish.

Thoughts like these can come to our minds at those emotionally charged transition periods of our life: when we leave home, get our first job, get married, have children, have an empty nest or retire.

Even more, questions about the purpose of life come when we lose a loved one or friend. Being reminded of our own mortality can lead us to analyze our lives and seek deeper meaning to it all.

Direction in life

What is the real purpose of life? It's the most important philosophical question; yet at the same time, it is deeply practical. Knowing our purpose gives direction to our lives.

As U.S. President John F. Kennedy said, "Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction."

Knowing our purpose gives direction to our lives.

And as pioneering futurist Alvin Toffler said, "You've got to think about big things while you're doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction."

A life full of purpose is a life of vitality, excitement and ultimately success.

So what is the purpose of life—of your life?

Seeking the meaning of life: a grand experiment

Is the purpose of life to pursue happiness—through comedy, music and other entertainment? Through mood-altering substances? Through enjoying fine food and other perks of the rich and famous?

Or what about through great building projects or other great accomplishments that will make a mark on this world and be remembered for years to come?

Many have attempted these and similar pursuits in their attempt to find true purpose in life. One wealthy man in particular experimented with all these things and more, and still came to a disconcerting conclusion:

"Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor; and this was my reward from all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

Is this all there is?

God had given King Solomon great wealth and great wisdom. His experiments in seeking purpose in life were not half-hearted! And he did find some satisfaction in the things he tried.

But he, like the rest of us in quiet moments of reflection, still wondered, Is this all there is? Are these physical and temporary things really why I was born? It is all so fleeting and temporary—like trying to catch the wind.

If all the money in the world can't buy a meaningful life or give us its purpose, what can deprivation teach us?

Man's Search for Meaning: a view from the depths

Viktor E. Frankl experienced the depths of human misery in the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. Soon after the war, he wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* and described the degrading and dehumanizing conditions prisoners experienced.

Even during a frozen predawn march punctuated with blows from rifle butts, his mind searched for meaning through vivid thoughts about his wife:

"A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love.* I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honorable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment" (pp. 56–57).

What a beautiful, yet tragic, thought. Viktor Frankl's wife died in the camps, and he never had the chance to see her again.

Love and family

Dr. Frankl and the poets were on to something. Love and family are essential elements of the true purpose of life. But there's so much more to it than Dr. Frankl experienced in those fleeting moments of bliss. In fact, there's much more to life's purpose than any human being, in the very best of circumstances, has yet experienced during this short lifetime.

All of us, whether in a concentration camp, a beautiful chateau or a cancer ward, face a mortal enemy that robs us of life and purpose. That enemy is death. (Why does God allow that enemy? Why does God allow us to die? See our online article "Why Do We Die?")

But the purpose God has for our lives goes beyond our physical bodies and our temporary lives. God offers human beings the chance to prepare now to have a purposeful, meaningful life—forever!

Eternity in their hearts

God has put "eternity in their hearts" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). He didn't create us to burn like a candle for just a short time, but—if we will accept the incredible mission and purpose He has for us—to shine "like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:3)!

God's essential characteristic is love (1 John 4:8). He created us and gives us purpose in life because He loves us. And He wants us to learn the eternal joys of this complete and perfect love!

And as we explore the Bible, just when we think it can't get any better, it does! Not only does God want to love us and to love us forever—He wants us to become His children! Not just servants, and not even just friends of God—but His literal children!

Children of God

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1). Jesus Christ is not ashamed to call His faithful followers "brethren," and His plan and our purpose include helping bring "many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10-11).

God is expanding His family, and the purpose of life is to become part of that family! He wants us to be His children and heirs forever, helping Him in His work.

We may not fully understand this meaning and purpose of life now. As Paul wrote, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

But the glimpses God gives and our trust in His goodness reveal that being children of God will be beyond our wildest dreams. Working with our Father will be the most meaningful work possible!

Why is it important to find your purpose in life?

Some have derided Christians for being so heavenly-minded that they were of no earthly good. But true Christianity and true understanding of the purpose of life is very practical and beneficial for this life.

The Bible teaches that this life is preparation for eternity. We are to learn to treat others as we want to be treated—for eternity! We fulfill our responsibilities and grow in the godly, righteous character that will allow us to be like our Father—forever!

Preparing for eternity

We are in training now for an incredible inheritance beyond our comprehension. The things we suffer now prepare us for that purpose. Tests and trials are all part of that training process to help us be ready to live and reign with Christ for a thousand years—and beyond (Revelation 20:4)!

Looking back, we will consider, as the apostle Paul said, "that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

King David foresaw this incredible future with God: "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

The apostle John was also given glimpses of this amazing future—a vision of our real purpose in life that we need to keep burning brightly in our mind's eye:

"Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

> "There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

"'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.'

"Then He who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new' . . .

"'He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son'" (Revelation 21:2-5, 7).

So what is the real purpose of life?

The meaning and purpose of life is to prepare to become the children of God, so we can enjoy eternity working together with our loving Father in the most exciting, meaningful endeavors imaginable!

Explore in your own Bible this amazing purpose of your life! We hope our booklet *God's Purpose for You* will help you understand and act on the purpose God has for you.



Chapter 12

How to Find God's Will for You

Wouldn't it be great to know exactly how God wants us to serve? God's will doesn't have to be a mystery. Here's how to discern God's will.

Have you ever faced a crossroads in life and wondered, like Paul on the road to Damascus, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

We may wish we could receive a personal answer as Paul did. But the Bible shows God does not work that way with most people—nor does He generally strike people blind to get their attention! However, He does want us to know His will, His plan and specific things He wants us to do.

Let's look at some of the ways we can discover God's will for us individually. How does He want you and me to use the gifts He has given us?

But first we need the overview. What is the primary purpose for our lives? What is God's great desire for all of us now and for eternity?

What is the will of God?

When you get down to it, God gave us the entire Bible to reveal His will. But let's start by looking at a few summary scriptures that help us to get a glimpse of His awesome plan for us.

- Jesus said: "For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50).
- "And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17).
- "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! . . . We know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:1-3).

As amazing as it sounds, God's will is for us to become like Him—to become His children! We encourage you to read these passages in your own Bible, to read the surrounding scriptures and the many others like them. (Our online article "Relationship With God" can help you explore this mind-boggling part of God's will for you.)

With this awesome purpose in mind, what should we do? How do we align ourselves to God's will? Consider these key scriptures that show what God expects and how He helps us think and act like Him.

- "What does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?" (Deuteronomy 10:12-13; see also Micah 6:8).
- "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2).

The Holy Bible and God's Holy Spirit are gifts from God to help us know and do His will so we can be transformed to become like Him.

This is vitally important, and we have a number of resources to help you explore God's will in much greater depth. We urge you to read "How to Please God," "What Does the Fear of the Lord Mean?" *God's 10 Commandments: Still Relevant Today* and *Change Your Life!*

When God's will conflicts with your will

Jesus Christ set the ultimate example of yielding to God's will. When He faced His impending beating and crucifixion—trials that no human being would ever want to face—He prayed: "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup [of suffering] away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

Whenever you discover that God's plans differ from yours, can you put His will ahead of your own? Whenever

you find that what you want to do is wrong, can you yield to God's will? That's the mind of Christ!

Of course, some aspects of life are not so much questions of right or wrong as they are questions of wisdom and making the best choices. Sometimes more than one choice can be within God's will.

What career should you choose? What job should you pursue? Who should you marry? Where should you live? God gives principles that can help us make good choices in dealing with these types of questions. See Chapter 4: "How to Make Wise Decisions" for some helpful tips.

Discerning God's will for you

We have looked at God's overall will for humanity—the wonderful purpose for our lives. Now let's consider: What is God's will for you, with your unique roles, talents, interests and background?

God gives us gifts, He says, in order to build up His Church and for the "profit of all" (Ephesians 4:12, 16; 1 Corinthians 12:7). He intends for us to take them and serve others.

How can you discover how God wants you to serve and use your gifts?

1. Pray for God's guidance

The best one to show us God's will is—God! He wants us to pray for His help. He was pleased when Solomon asked Him for an "understanding heart" (1 Kings 3:9). He will also be happy when we trust in Him and ask Him to direct our paths (Proverbs 3:5-6).

2. Write down your roles and study what God says about them

We each currently have roles and responsibilities. For example, a man may be a son, husband, father, employee, citizen and member of the Church. The Bible has much to say about each of these roles. By studying what God says about these responsibilities, we can put them into the right priority and take steps to fulfill God's will in each area.

3. Write down your gifts and study what God says about them

The Bible also talks about individual talents and spiritual gifts that God gives to each of us. Though they differ, God intends for us to use them to serve each other and build up His Church (1 Corinthians 12:4-8).

How can we know which gifts we have been given? After asking God for help to see them, we can ask ourselves: What have I done well and enjoyed doing? What needs have I filled? What needs do I have the skills and abilities to fulfill? How do others describe me? (It can be helpful to ask family members and friends how they see you serving and what they suggest you volunteer to do.)

After writing down talents, skills and interests you could use to serve, take time to study those gifts in the Bible. How does God want them to be used? How does God *not* want them to be used? How can they be used most effectively? And can we stay humble in God's eyes and avoid the pride and vanity that Satan loves to pump into human minds?

4. Look for needs

Needs abound all around us—far more than any of us could fulfill. But as we give attention to the needs, we may come across some that our gifts, interests and resources are uniquely suited for.

Our study of how God looks at our roles and our gifts can help us put the service opportunities into proper priority. In general, God expects us to serve Him first, family second, the Church third, and the rest of the world next (Matthew 6:33; 1 Timothy 5:8; Galatians 6:10). This is always a balancing act that takes us back to our knees, as well as to the next point.

5. Seek wise counsel

If our personal study and survey of the opportunities around us leaves us still wondering what to do, why not seek wise counsel from others who know us—parents, grandparents, friends, mentors, ministers, etc. They can help us see gifts in ourselves and opportunities around us we may have missed. They can introduce us to people and perhaps even open doors to new pursuits.

6. Serve!

Some people seem to just keep waiting for the perfect occasion before they give of themselves. Service often requires us to move outside our comfort zone to help others, learn new skills or grow in godly character traits like humility and patience.

No matter what our gifts are, it is God's will that we all lovingly, diligently get in there and serve (Romans 12:10-13).

7. Help others serve

Once we have finally found our niche, we naturally take responsibility for it. We take ownership and joy in helping in that area. This is all good and right.

But even then, it's easy to become so focused on the specific job that we lose sight of one of God's other goals for us. At some point He may want us to train others who have potential in the same area. He may want us to move on to other service opportunities or greater needs or where we can grow more. Being territorial—this is "my job and

mine alone"—is not the way of God, who is continually training each of us to become more like Him.

So look for ways to help and develop others as well as yourself. Be flexible, since sometimes God reveals His will by circumstances and by what is possible (1 Corinthians 16:7; James 4:15). Be willing to stretch—to hand over opportunities to others and learn something new outside your comfort zone.

When we can't immediately discern God's will

There will be times, of course, when we just do not immediately know God's will in a specific situation. But even those are growth times, where in our waiting we learn to trust Him to help us work through the challenges. They are the moments when we remember that all our Father allows is for our ultimate good (Romans 8:28).

When it is a spiritual trial, we learn to go into that test with this confidence: "Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19).

Growing to become more like God is a continual process. It can be hard. But it will have amazing, eternal rewards!

And that is God's will.

Additional Resources

Finding Hope in a Hopeless World
Dealing With Anxiety
The 5 Rs of Healing Relationships
God's Design for Marriage
God's Purpose for You: Discovering Why You Were Born
Five Tools for Spiritual Growth
Change Your Life
"Relationships" section of the LifeHopeandTruth.com website

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LifeHopeandTruth.com exists to fill a critical void in this world: the lack of understanding about the purpose of life, the lack of realistic hope for a better future and the lack of truth!

Neither religion nor science has satisfactorily addressed these issues, so people today are of divided opinions, confused or, worst of all, don't care anymore. The ancient words of the prophet Isaiah ring so true today: "Truth is fallen in the street." Why? Is it because God was right when He warned that humans are inclined to reject Him and usually choose not to know Him?

We are here for people who are searching for answers, who are ready to prove all things or who are hungry for more than what they've been taught most of their lives about God, the Bible, the meaning of life and how to live. We want to help you truly understand the good news of the gospel and fulfill Jesus Christ's admonition to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness."

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