



COMPASS CHECK

Helping you turn your spiritual compass toward God



How To **Master Your Feelings *and* Change Your *Life***

| Don't Like Conflict?
Master Disagreement!

| Look Past the "First Day
of Camp" Scaries

| What Must I Say or Do for
God to Hear My Prayers?

| Beware of Hopium

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COMPASS CHECK

Compass Check is a biblically based magazine for young people of the United Church of God, an International Association (UCGIA). Our name, *Compass Check*, describes youth aged 12-18 pointing their spiritual compass toward God.

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The goal of *Compass Check* is to inspire Church youth, ages 12-18, to respond to the gospel message.

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COMPASS CORNER

Dear Compass Checkers,

I don't know about you, but I'm just about done with winter. Cold, drizzly rain seems to be all we've seen here in the Southeast for the past few months. Some of you have experienced even harsher winter conditions with record-breaking cold in some parts of the country and heavy snowfall in others.

Of course, the rain and snow provide a lot of much needed moisture for the ground, and that ground will soon be bringing forth the bright colors of spring. Green grass, blue skies and a rainbow of flower blooms. And with spring comes a rejuvenated outlook on life. The Song of Solomon contains a lovely verse in regards to this phenomenon, "For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land" (Song of Solomon 2:11-12).

A part of springtime is getting ready for the fun of summer. After missing out on last year's camp experiences due to COVID, I bet we are all more excited than ever for summer camp. And if you're a tad bit nervous about camp, that's okay, we've all been there (see the article "First Day of Camp" in this issue).

So what does springtime have you looking forward to? Enjoying some fresh air and sunshine in a game of baseball perhaps? A nice long bike ride through the park? What about the upcoming Holy Days? In addition to a much needed spiritual refreshing, it brings all those yummy unleavened bread recipes we all love so much!

Whatever this spring finds you doing, I pray the articles in this issue of *Compass Check* help you enjoy it that much more!



Dan Preston, *Compass Check* editor, pastors in North and South Carolina, enjoys UYC Camps, the outdoors and getting dirt under his fingernails in the garden and garage.



Q *What Must I Say or Do for God to Hear My Prayers?*



A

There is no ritual or particular set of words you need to say for God to hear your prayers. But we do bear responsibility in how we approach God in prayer.

God has the ability and the desire to hear all prayers. He wants to hear from us, and He wants to give us good things. But clearly He does not grant any and all requests made in prayer. If you're wondering whether there's anything you can do to get God to *grant your requests*, or get Him to use His awesome power to help you accomplish your goals, it's not quite that simple.

There's no set formula for prayer that would obligate God to grant a request. If that were true then God would be more like a magic genie in a lamp. We cannot control or manipulate God through any words, actions or rituals. Sometimes God answers our prayers with a "yes," a "no," or a "not right now." He chooses to answer, or not, as He pleases.

However, we do have a part to play in our interactions with our Intercessor. And our prayers must be offered to our Father in heaven in the name of and through the authority of our Intercessor Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that our attitudes and actions have an effect on how God responds to our prayers.

HOW WE AFFECT OUR PRAYER LIFE

On the negative side, indifference or disobedience to His commands, as well as violence, dishonesty, pride and

injustice create a separation (called sin) between us and our Creator (Isaiah 59:1-2). God can choose to not hear, or not attend to, the prayers of people who are actively living unrighteous lives.

John 9:31 says, "Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, He hears him."

And 1 Peter 3:12 says, "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

God may choose to act in mercy in certain cases to get the attention of evildoers and lead them towards meaningful change. But these verses show the damage that can happen to our potential closeness to God if we continually reject His guidance and commands.

On the positive side, taking His commands seriously and trying to live by them—seeking peace and having honesty, humility, personal integrity, generosity and fairness—these please our Creator and draw us closer to Him. The Bible shows that God will give careful attention to the prayers and requests of those who love His ways and live by His Word.

Psalms 66:17-19 says, "I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the LORD would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer" (English Standard Version).

**THE BIBLE SHOWS THAT
GOD WILL GIVE CAREFUL
ATTENTION TO THE PRAYERS
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And James 5:16 says, “. . . The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (New International Version).

He will still choose to act, or not act, according to His will, but it’s clear that there is a difference in how God hears and responds to those whose hearts are turned toward Him.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Ultimately, the good that God desires for us is to learn to think and act like Jesus Christ and receive the gift of everlasting life. This means that even when we pray requesting something we genuinely believe to be good for us or our families, God may have a different perspective. The path to His family and eternal life involves suffering and perseverance, just as it did for Jesus Christ. And just because God might answer with a “no” or “not right now” doesn’t necessarily mean our prayers are not answered because of a personal sin.

Consider how Jesus prayed the night before His execution. He prayed that God the Father not require Him to endure the painful suffering and death that lay only hours ahead of Him. The request was not granted. Jesus’

long session of prayer that last night ended with His submission to the will of the Father (Matthew 26:39-44). Jesus’ suffering was the only path to the greater goal: God’s desire that many children receive eternal life.

In the same manner, our sessions of prayer and our requests are often the way in which we get our thoughts, attitudes and goals in sync with the thoughts, attitudes and priorities of our Creator.

We might pray for release from pain, sickness or suffering, or we might pray for specific blessings, and our Father is happy to give us these good things. But if granting a certain request held us back from achieving our full potential as an eternal child of God, it wouldn’t actually be good for us in the ultimate sense. We must have confidence that God knows the difference between the two and can make a better decision than we alone can.

Even though it’s up to God to decide how He responds to us, we must not give up prayer thinking we are powerless to influence events. We are instructed to pray continually, to keep hanging in there; and to expect an answer (1 Thessalonians 5:17, 1 John 5:14).

We should pray completely convinced and confident that God hears our prayer and is fully capable of answering our every request (Hebrews 11:6). We should

also pray with a humble attitude, understanding that what we think is best for us may not be the way to achieve the greater goal our Creator has in mind for us: growing in spiritual completeness after the pattern of Jesus Christ, and in the future receiving the gift of everlasting life. **CC**

A version of this Q&A originally appeared on UCG.org.





are in the midst of a national epidemic of the use of methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana, fentanyl, heroin and other drugs to get high. There are daily reports about overdoses, death and crimes committed. The damage on a national scale is almost incomprehensible. But of all the chemical drugs and methods people use to get high, what is the worst one?

Believe it or not, there is a dangerous drug you haven't heard of but need to know about, because *you will be tempted* to use it! What's it called? "Hopium."

What is "Hopium?" Hopium can be defined as: "making decisions based on hope," "breaking the rules but hoping things will work out okay," or "choosing not to think about evidence that does not support

what you hope for." Hopium can also be understood as being dishonest with yourself when you choose to do something you know you should not do, reasoning that somehow the rules won't apply this time. Hopium is often based on *emotions* or *wants*, not facts and reality.

HOPIUM IN ACTION

So, what are some examples of Hopium in action? Besides chemical drug use, here are some simple examples to consider:

Have you ever neglected to study for an exam and hoped that somehow you would still get a good grade? Hopium, causes you to develop habits, and habits shape your future. Choosing to waste time during school or neglect homework while assuming you will have a great career with excellent income can be one costly result of Hopium.

Gambling is another example of Hopium in



We are warned by James, “Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed” (James 1:14).

action. Millions of people regularly spend their hard-earned money chasing the illusion of easy winnings from a machine or lottery game. Gambling machines and games exist to *take* money from people, not give it away. False hope—Hopium—clouds our vision by replacing the truth with a fantasy. The Bible gives us the formula for financial success in Proverbs chapter six: Follow the example of the ant working hard and saving up for the future. We are also warned in Proverbs 15:27, “He who is greedy for gain troubles his own house.”

Impulse purchases are also often the result of Hopium. It is easy to make an emotional decision to buy clothes, gadgets or even a car that you cannot afford. Hopium results in signing your name on the line for a loan that is beyond your budget, hoping that somehow you will be able to pay it off later. Engaging in use of this drug, Hopium, causes you to ignore the warning: “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender” (Proverbs 22:7).

HOPIMUM IN LOVE

Hopium does some of its greatest damage when it enters into relationships. To share just one story: Mary

(name changed) called her minister in tears. Her husband was in jail for driving under the influence. When my wife and I arrived at her house, she said she was afraid because her first two husbands had died in auto accidents while driving drunk. She was 29 years old and had married a third alcoholic. When asked why she married men she knew had a drinking problem, she replied, “I always thought they would quit once they were married to me.” Unfortunately, Mary’s Hopium story is all too common.

When our Creator designed us as male and female He said, “It is very good!” And indeed, it is when done God’s way. To find a life-mate who shares your desire to obey God and be in His kingdom is one of the greatest experiences a person can have in this life. Peter (the apostle referred to as being married and taking his wife with him on his travels) describes this as being co-heirs “together of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7). When dating and thinking about romance, the aim of finding a like-minded, godly mate should be at the forefront of your mind. The most important qualities to assess about anyone you’re considering dating are their character and dedication to following God. Everything else is secondary.

All too often, the emotions and desires of a relationship provide lots of room for Hopium to do great damage. While young men are just as able to deceive themselves about a girl they are interested in, it’s the young ladies who are often in the greatest danger of a Hopium-induced romance that can damage them for many years to come.

Many young women have been known to tell themselves that a young man with a bad track record will somehow change after she is “with him.” In their desire for a relationship, they will convince themselves that he will change, or that the things he has done in his past are somehow just temporary, or even worse, that if she does not give in and marry him no one else will come along.

Young men can make the same mistake. Dating someone outside of your faith, hoping that they someday “come around” to understanding the truths of the Bible is a prime example of Hopium. There are some excellent books

available that provide superb guidance in evaluating relationships. Talk to your pastor or an adult you trust and ask for some recommendations.

Additionally, there are some crucial red-flag warning signs that should not be ignored *under any circumstances*. If you are dating or interested in someone and you find them lying to or manipulating people, using illegal drugs or pornography, having outbursts of anger, or simply being lazy and wasting much of their time, don't walk away, RUN! God says to you, "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Hopium in relationships can cause great mental and emotional damage in your life.

So what desirable qualities *should* you be on the lookout for if you are a young man seeking a wife? Paul wrote about young women in the Church during his time: "The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit" (1 Corinthians 7:34). A girl whose main goal in life is to be holy in body and spirit will make a wonderful wife! And

what should a young lady look for? The same qualities: "He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord" (verse 32). Search for a young man who desires to obey and please God. If you follow Paul's advice here, you can't go wrong!

SOURCES OF HOPIUM

The Bible contains many examples of people who were high on Hopium and made terrible and costly mistakes. Genesis 34 tells the tragic story of Dinah, a young lady who thought the rules didn't apply to her but hoped everything would work out. As a result, hundreds of people died, and she is never mentioned again. Other examples include men like Achan (Joshua 7), Gehazi (2 Kings 5), King Saul and even King David—who all sinned while hoping things would still be okay. All had to endure the consequences of their Hopium-induced decisions. But what was the source of their bad decision-making?

One source of Hopium is bad advice or bad examples from friends. Proverbs 12:26 warns us about the bad advice that friends can give: "The righteous should choose his friends carefully, for the way of the wicked leads them astray," and Proverbs 13:20 summarizes that thought by saying: "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed."

Another source of Hopium is our own desires and lack of self-control. We are warned by James, "Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (James 1:14),

and self-control is listed as one of the fruits of God's spirit (Galatians 5:23). Jesus warned us about the danger of covetousness: "He said to them, 'Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses'" (Luke 12:15).

ANTIDOTE FOR HOPIUM

If you are in danger of getting high on Hopium, you need the antidote. And there's only one—Truthium! Living by truth will give you freedom from harmful decisions and relationships. Some of the most important words ever spoken are: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). But it is not merely given to you, suddenly causing you to become perfect or immune to danger; you must diligently seek out the truth and desire to know it. And what is the source of truth? It comes from God's word, as Jesus Christ described to his Father in prayer: "Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

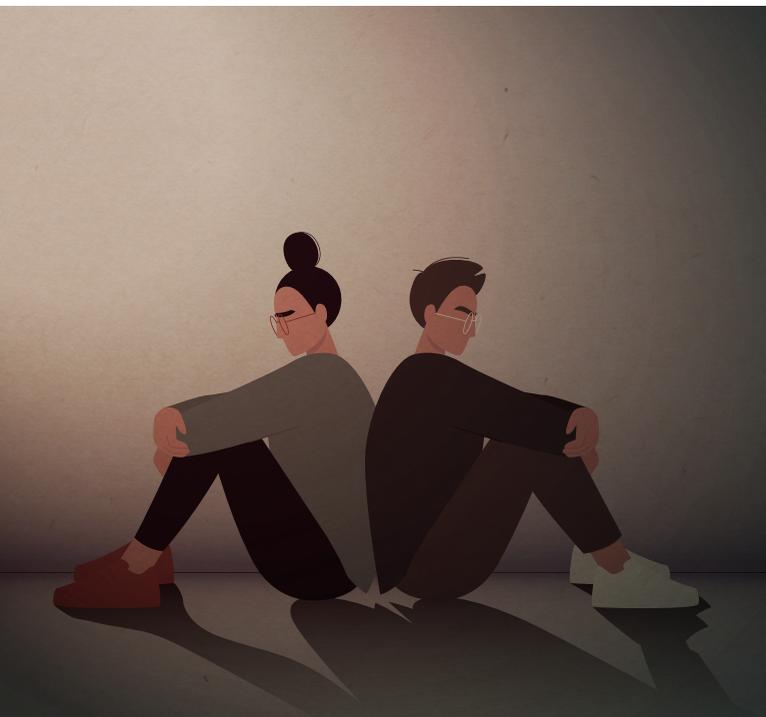
God's word is to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path as we live on this earth (Psalm 119:105). Living by every word of God—allowing God's truth to really guide and direct your thoughts and actions—will actually prevent Hopium from influencing you to make wrong decisions in your life. Remember Proverbs 6:23: "For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life" (English Standard Version).

As you make decisions every day, seek out God's will and pray for wisdom. God says He will answer that prayer if it is sincere: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally . . . and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

So, beware of Hopium, but be close to Truthium! **CC**



Rex Sexton is a church pastor in Portland, Oregon, and Northwest Camp director.



A silhouette of an elephant is shown against a vibrant sunset sky with orange and pink clouds. The elephant is facing right, and its trunk is slightly raised. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

How to **MASTER YOUR FEELINGS** *and* **CHANGE YOUR LIFE**

Sometimes, it seems like life would just be simpler if we didn't have feelings. Have you ever felt that way?

by Mitchell Moss

Sure, the highs of joy and excitement are nice, but those gut-wrenching lows that come when someone breaks up with you, for instance, are the worst. I remember this girl I had feelings for in high school. Whenever we spent time together in groups with our other friends, that butterfly in the pit of my stomach was there. That was a fun feeling. But there were also many times when I wasn't sure if she liked me back, and sometimes she'd say or do things that

made me think she didn't. Ugh, the misery! Those butterflies would clump into a heavy mass in the pit of my stomach. One night she and several friends were over at my house and she said something really mean that absolutely gutted my hopes we might officially start dating. After they all left, I literally collapsed on the floor. (I let myself be a little dramatic in the moment).

But what was not dramatic was that I had no appetite for like two days

afterward. Those feelings of sadness, betrayal and disappointment were so strong that they took away even my appetite! That's when it feels like life would be simpler if we just didn't have emotions.

Of course we all know that emotions are here to stay. Correctly processing and managing our emotions is in fact a critical part of being a functional human being. Actually, in an ideal world, it's those gut-wrenching experiences that teach you how to handle things when

times get tough. But we live in a very less-than-ideal world, so there are millions of adults walking around who haven't learned the right lessons from their experiences, and the result is emotional immaturity.

With so much of life beyond our control, it can feel hopeless when those gut-wrenching moments come and the emotions take over. It can feel like you are riding a huge elephant that's charging right towards a cliff, ignoring your pleas and pulls on the reins to stop. What can you do to bring this huge beast into submission? How can you even hope to stop feeling the way you do and move on in your life?

There are three steps I've learned that are helpful in managing, processing, and growing from powerful emotions:



Step 1—Ask, “Why am I feeling this way?”

Step 2—Change your thoughts, change your life.

Step 3—Enlist the Holy Spirit in the fight.

1. “WHY AM I FEELING THIS WAY?”

In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain, being angry (and also probably disappointed, frustrated and jealous), came to hate his brother Abel and murder him (Genesis 4:2-8). Here's a perfect example of one man's inability to manage his emotions and the bad that came out of it. It's an extreme example—and one where the cause of the emotional trauma was Cain himself, unlike many of the situations we find ourselves in where the situation is

beyond our control—but we can still draw lessons from it.

To recap: both brothers make an offering to God, and while Abel's offering is accepted, Cain's is not. Cain gets mad, and God, knowing what was in his mind, says: “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it” (Genesis 4:6-7, New International Version). Right here, in this brief

exchange between God and man, are clues about learning to manage our emotions.

The first thing to note is that the emotions are not the problem. God's warning to Cain is about his behavior—“If you do what is right,” and, “you must rule over [sin].” Millennia later King David sang, “Be angry, and do not sin” (Psalm 4:4), which the apostle Paul reiterated to the Ephesian Church (Ephesians 4:26). God created us to have emotions. Take heart to know that God knows how you're



**CAIN MURDERED ABEL BECAUSE
OF UNCONTROLLED EMOTIONS.
DON'T BE LIKE CAIN.**

feeling, and Jesus probably felt the exact same way at some point in His own life. They get it! It's how you respond to those emotions that God is interested in.

After that, the first step you should take to handle your feelings is to ask yourself "Why am I feeling this way?" That's what God asked Cain. It can be easy to either wallow in your feelings or beat yourself up for feeling that way. But psychologist Guy Winch says that's a mistake: "Don't spend time feeling bad that you're having emotions. Get curious, because when you get curious, there's a defense mechanism there to take you to an intellectual level, which distances you from the emotion and allows you to think through it" ("Emotions Aren't Irrational," *TheAtlantic.com*, June 25, 2019).

If your emotions have completely taken over and are fogging up your thoughts—a break-up causing you to lose your appetite, or a furious rage at a loved one over their mistreatment of you—asking yourself "Why am I feeling this way?" initiates your rational thinking process, helping break through the emotional fog. Then you can start thinking more rationally, trying to identify the cause of your emotions and deal with them.

Thinking of your emotions this way—as something to be managed and mastered through practice and God's Spirit—is a powerful, life-changing practice.

Some people simply bury their emotions, but that never makes anybody better off either—usually it causes that emotion to simmer under the surface, only to burst out in a much worse way later on. Psychotherapist Lori Gottlieb, who writes a "Dear Therapist" column for *The Atlantic* magazine, puts it this way: "Emotions are like GPS. They help to guide us. Follow your envy; it tells you what you want. If you're feeling sad, why? Something's not working" (*ibid.*). Her advice flips the normal and terrible advice you usually hear on its head: instead of being led by your emotions, you tell your feelings "I'm onto you . . ." discovering their underlying cause so you can root them out.

Cain's disappointment turned into anger that

simmered into hatred for his brother, which led him to murder. That's allowing your feelings to lead you. Instead, acknowledge your feelings so that you can discover why you're having them. Then you can work on a game plan to manage them in a healthy, godly way.

2. CHANGE YOUR THOUGHTS, CHANGE YOUR LIFE

The analogy I used earlier of an elephant charging, ignoring your pleas to stop, is actually a legit metaphor I learned that psychologists use. They roughly categorize our thoughts into two systems. About 80 percent of your thinking makes up the first system, which is automatic; it's made up of your emotions and intuitions. It guides your daily habits, your gut reactions and your first impressions. The other 20 percent is the intentional thinking you do: your logical, rational thinking, which handles more complex mental activities like learning new information and managing relationships (Gleb Tsipursky, "How to Manage Your Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviors," *Psychology Today*, April 13, 2016).

The first system—the 80 percent—is like that elephant. It's been built up over your lifetime by your experiences, upbringing, relationships and personality. It's difficult and slow to change, and actually might feel unchangeable because it's so automatic. A big part of this system includes your "human nature," a concept the Bible talks about. Jeremiah prophesied about it (Jeremiah 17:9); Jesus warned about it (Mark 7:21-23); Paul wrote about it (1 Corinthians 2:14). Because the world is under the influence of Satan, our human nature is influenced by evil without us even realizing it. And that in turns feeds into our natural, automatic thinking system (the elephant).

But even as large an animal as an elephant can be guided and moved by humans. Trained elephant riders are called mahouts. Just as a mahout trains to be able to guide an elephant, we can train so we can manage our emotions.

Here's how: once you've asked "Why am I feeling this way?", the next step is to intentionally choose what you think about.

That's it. Simple, right? But oh so difficult to do!

If you're feeling angry at someone, choose to think positive thoughts about them. Remember that they're made in God's image, same as you; that they're someone's child, sibling, and friend; that they're probably dealing with problems you don't even know about. We know that we must eventually forgive people—it's right there in Jesus' model prayer (Matthew 6:12). Intentionally thinking better thoughts helps make emotions such as grief, anger and betrayal begin to fade with time.

I'm not saying that intentionally changing your thoughts

instantly flips a switch that makes your feelings go away. But neither does an elephant simply turn on a dime when it's charging forward. You must patiently practice, choosing your thoughts all the time. "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:8, NIV). Slowly, day by day, you will begin to guide your emotional elephant to the place you want to go. And the more you do it, the better you get—you start to become an elephant whisperer. Instead of trying to turn the beast once it's going, you will be able to steer it in the direction you want to go before it starts moving.

3. ENLIST "THE HELPER"

This life-changing practice of reshaping your emotions by changing your thoughts is available to anybody. There is no prerequisite for exercising self-control over your thoughts. But God offers you a serious leg up if you're willing to take it: the Holy Spirit. Jesus called it "the Helper," and it is a definite help in our quest to manage our feelings.

How? For starters, it shows you what you need to be working on. God's Spirit helps by illuminating the path you need to



**TAKE HEART TO KNOW THAT GOD
KNOWS HOW YOU'RE FEELING,
AND JESUS PROBABLY FELT THE
EXACT SAME WAY AT SOME POINT
IN HIS OWN LIFE. THEY GET IT!**

be walking on. The Psalmist sang, "Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105, NIV). God's Spirit takes it to the next level, and writes God's laws on your heart.

This doesn't mean God's Spirit will do the work for you—you have to yield to it (search "how do you overcome sins you can't get under control" at UCG.org for an article we published in *Compass Check* about that a few years ago). The Spirit puts God's will on your heart and you learn to listen to it, then act on it.

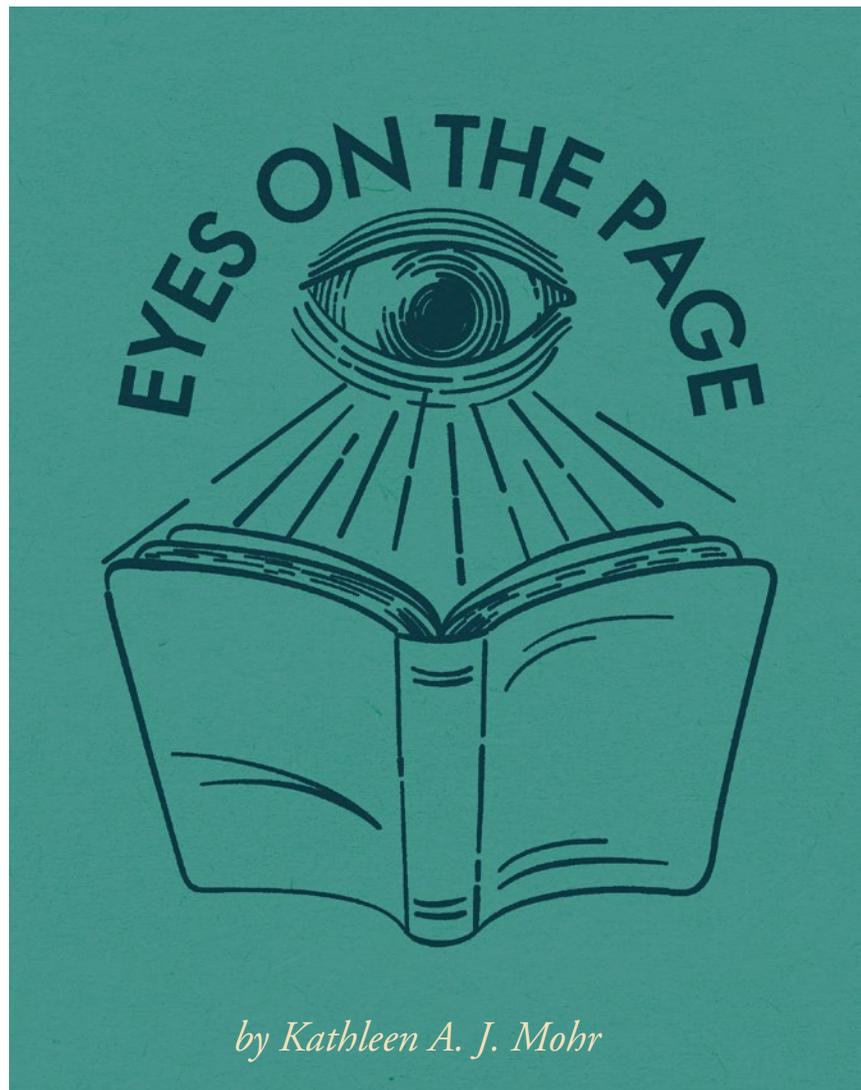
If you respond to God's call and decide to invite His Spirit in through baptism, you'll have a secret weapon in the fight we all face in becoming someone with solid emotional composure. In the meantime, as someone exposed to God's way of life and His Word, the Bible, the Holy Spirit is in your life already as a positive influence through your parents, family or friends who have taught you about God's way.

I remained friends with the girl I had feelings for in high school, and as time went by all that drama disappeared from memory. As I got older, I went through other emotionally heartbreaking situations, some of which still sting when I think about them. But they all taught me lessons that shaped me and helped me figure out these three steps, which I hope will help you right now.

Remember them when you find yourself feeling emotionally out of control on an elephant charging towards the cliff, ignoring your pleas to stop. As you practice choosing to engage your rational brain in the heat of the moment, choosing your thoughts at all times, and asking for God's influence through His Spirit, you'll be well on your way to becoming an emotionally mature and functional adult. **CC**



Mitchell Moss lives in Nashville with his wife Dana and sons Stirling and Luca. They love traveling, particularly in Italy, where the tailoring is soft, the people are warm and the gelato cold (and never-ending).



Have you ever marveled at the uniquely human ability to read? My training as a literacy teacher and researcher has challenged me to understand what actually happens in the mind while eyes are gazing at words on a page or screen. Reading to understand words is a complex orchestration of brain activity. Indeed, reading reflects the wonderful gifts of language, visual processing and sense-making that God has given humankind—gifts that we should put to good use to learn more about God and His creation.

Unfortunately, too many students would rather avoid reading, especially if it feels difficult or unproductive. Choosing not to read results in fewer opportunities to learn from texts and grow. Since reading is such a vital part of our spiritual lives as Christians (and life in general), it is important to consider how to make Bible reading more efficient and meaningful.

As noted in Joshua 1:8, God has shared His Word to help us prosper. A bit more detail can be found in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for

correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” This means that we have different reasons for reading the Bible—different goals depending on our needs at different times. And they’re all for our benefit.

▼
Some of these goals include:

- Getting to know God better
- Understanding laws and commandments
- Visualizing things that have happened and anticipating what is predicted
- Receiving answers to important questions
- Communing with God to receive wisdom, comfort, hope and strength



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER READING

What follows are a few recommendations I've come across in my research. My hope is that these will help you develop as a Bible reader and allow you to get more out of your time spent with God's Word.

1. START WITH A GOAL

We should come to a text with a personal quest for the reading. We commonly spend more time on aspects of texts that pertain to our predetermined goals (known as the "relevance effect"). Without a goal, reading can become an aimless or mindless task. Essentially, putting in time reading the Bible is not the same as gaining understanding from it. It works better to set personal goals for your reading. Praying for help to meet a reading goal can also enhance the whole process.

It should be noted that starting with a predetermined goal does not mean starting with a predetermined outcome. Our goal should be to better understand what Scripture means, not just find a scripture that supports a thought we already have.

Studies have also shown that we read differently when our goal is to learn something new than when we read for entertainment. Even young children attend to texts differently when asked to read to understand how and why, instead of when reading for details or general information.



Exercises to try:

- Read to answer how and why questions, not just for who, what and when details. For instance, read Genesis 18:22-33 to understand why or how Abraham pleaded with God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. This could result in a different understanding than reading the account just to rehearse what happened.
- Read from different perspectives. For example, have you read the verses in Matthew 14:22-33, which describe Peter walking on water at Christ's behest, from the perspective of Christ versus Peter? We can ask, as Christ did, why did Peter doubt? We can also consider, how did Christ respond? Another productive comparison of perspectives could be that of Jacob versus the Being with whom he wrestled in Genesis 32:22-32.

► Goals to start with:

- Gain information about historical context
- Receive correction from God
- Learn spiritual principles
- Develop deeper understanding
- Be encouraged, edified or inspired



Something to look for: ◀

- Many Bibles provide chapter headings or a brief synopsis of the scriptures that follow. These resources can help you grasp the context and establish a main idea that affords more attentive reading. (Of course, not all headings or summaries are accurate. Be sure to use multiple sources and double check with a parent or minister when questions come up.)



2. SEEK OUT THE MAIN IDEA OR GIST

Good readers seek coherence, or knowing how parts of a text inform the whole, which happens to be a major goal when studying the Bible. Just opening to a page to start reading or skimming isn't as effective as building a mental model of the gist—what a text is mostly about. The sense-making work of mindful readers makes the experience more memorable.

For example, Psalms 88-93 share examples of feeling estranged from God and then taking refuge in His care. Noticing the transition from despair to hope helps a reader to pay attention to important aspects of mental anguish and godly trust. In contrast, we might read 2 Chronicles 29 as an account of how a young king, Hezekiah, established a call to action to re-establish the temple and national commitment to God. The main idea in this case is more about discerning Hezekiah's actions and motives, rather than understanding his emotions.



3. PAY ATTENTION TO THE STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT AND USE VISUAL CUES

Rather than reading straight through a text, skilled readers visually attend to aspects of text that help them comprehend. Studies show that proficient readers fixate on and regress to parts of a text that help organize the message. These elements include headings, indentations, topic sentences and pictures.

This is one reason that holding a book while reading can improve memory of the text, more so than when reading on a screen. The limited visual space and two-dimensional presentation of screens hamper reading comprehension. Screen reading is also more fatiguing and shallow, which means readers make fewer personal connections to the text and don't remember it as well. Relying on technological platforms for Scripture reading may not yield as deep an understanding or appreciation of the collective Word.

A point to remember is that as readers of the Book, we should include time reading the printed version, as there are verified differences between reading the page and reading a screen.

Activities to add to your routine:

- Talk to God specifically about what you're reading and ask for greater understanding.
- Respond to the text by taking notes, writing a response, drawing a picture or discussing the topic with others.
- For some variety, consider reading some parts of Scripture—prayers, psalms of praise, commandments—aloud with expression to reinforce their wording and imprint them visually and aurally in your memory.

God has granted us the intellect to be able to read, a special skill set available for us to learn about God, His plan of salvation and how we can prepare for the future He has planned for us. Thus, reading is an integral activity for developing Christians. Plus, as the Bible is the most ubiquitous book in the world, we generally have no excuse for not reading it. Indeed, Bible reading should be a commitment for seeking daily spiritual nourishment. As noted in Job 23:12, "I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food" (English Standard Version).

May you read and prosper! **CC**

► Maximize your time with the Word:

- Good readers know not to race through a reading; they actively interact with texts. One recommendation is to try a variety of reading practices and mix up your strategies.



Kathleen A. J. Mohr is a professor of language and literacy at Utah State University. She teaches education and research courses, including Advanced Reading Comprehension.



LOOK PAST THE “FIRST DAY OF CAMP” SCARIES

by *Dan Preston*

1. MEETING NEW FRIENDS

Your parents and pastor have probably already hit you with this one, but it's true. It is IMPOSSIBLE to go to camp and not meet someone new. Not only will you meet someone new, I can virtually guarantee you will become lifelong friends with many of them, whether it be fellow campers, counselors or activity staff. And not only do you get to know them at camp and have a lot of fun together, when you go to the Feast of Tabernacles a few months later, you'll probably run into someone you already know and then have a built-in companion!

Do you remember your first day of school? I do. I did NOT want to go. I remember standing at the end of my driveway, crying and looking back at my house, upset with my mother for making me go. I was scared and wanted nothing more than to stay home and play with my toys. Getting on the bus, I was filled with dread, and I was certain that I would hate everything about school.

A few hours later (Kindergarten was only half a day for me), I returned home from school. Mom was there to meet me, and boy, was I a different child than the one that got on the bus that morning. I was smiling, happy and couldn't wait to tell my mom about all the fun I'd had at school!

Perhaps you've had a similar experience, or perhaps you're facing one now? "Wait a minute, I'm way past kindergarten, what's he talking about??"

Dread over something new and unfamiliar is common. And while we learn to handle it better as we age, that certain feeling of uneasiness over doing something we've never done before stays with us for life. Perhaps you even feel it now, as you consider going to one of UCG's many summer camps.

And while it's normal to have a few butterflies in your stomach, it's also important not to let it stop you from doing things. You've probably heard the old saying, "How do you know you don't like it if you don't try it?" It's been a long time, but I'm pretty sure my mom told me that on that dreaded first day of school too!

It's an old saying, but it's true: If you just give summer camp a try, I know you'll like it! And to help convince you of that, here are four things I guarantee you'll enjoy:



**THE AUTHOR AS A TEEN WITH A
FRIEND AT CAMP, c. 404 A.D.**

2. THE FOOD

Now, let me clarify here. I'm not trying to say that all the food at camp is great; in fact, let's just say, some of it's not quite the way momma made it . . . But mealtime together is a great opportunity to get to know people. It also provides a routine to the day. One of the things many first-time campers dread about camp is not being sure what is going to happen next: Are we going

to volleyball, or is it archery? Arts and crafts, or Christian living? While your counselors will always be there to give you a head's up on what activities are next, breakfast, lunch and dinner are set parts of your day you can count on. And if the food happens not to be so tasty, then at least you'll have the camp experience and something to talk about for years to come!

3. YOU'LL LEARN ABOUT YOURSELF

Let me get a little deep for a moment. At camp, you'll get to experience all kinds of new things. Maybe you've never shot a bow and arrow before. Or perhaps you've never had a chance to learn to dance. What about rock climbing or balancing on the high ropes? (Don't worry, there are safety harnesses.) I promise you'll experience something new, and here's where we get deep: You'll grow. Learning a new skill at camp is one thing. Learning that you can do new things and that you are only limited by your own mindset is something else altogether. One of the greatest benefits of camp is that it helps you to learn you can truly do anything you set your mind to.

4. YOU'LL LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR BIBLE

UCG's summer camps aren't just a place to learn how to play basketball or make cool crafts. They are a place to learn more about God and His Word, and more importantly, how doing so will make your life better. Consider Proverbs 9:9-11: "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a just man, and he will increase in learning. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years of life will be added to you." You probably already know quite a bit about the Bible. At camp, you'll learn more and, as mentioned, how it can help you have a longer, happier life!

Okay, now that I'm done preaching and have removed all doubts you might have had about going to camp (right??), here's what you need to do:

Talk to your parents and let them know you want to go. Don't take no for an answer (sorry parents . . .). If money or transportation is a problem, talk to your pastor—they'll do their



COTUBIC FOOD IS LEGENDARY



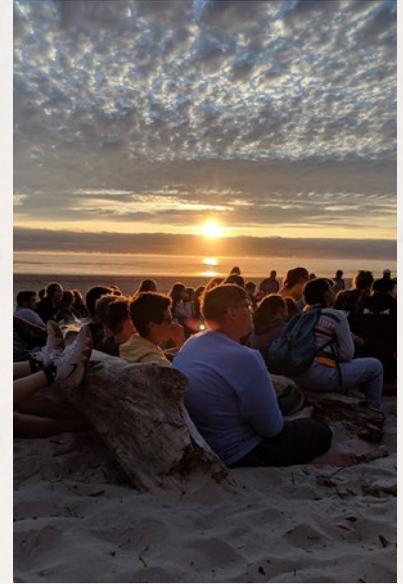
best to work something out!

Go online to ucg.org and find a camp location and time that works for you. The teen camps this year are:

Cotubic, OH	June 20–27
Hye Sierra, CA	June 27–July 4
Pinecrest, MO	July 11–18
Northwest, OR	July 18–25
Camp Woodland, GA	July 23–30
Winter Camp, WI	Dec. 27–Jan. 2

Register for camp and watch your emails! Once you get registered for camp (it's not hard, but you should do this with your parents since there is some adult stuff that they need to know), make sure and keep your eyes out for emails from camp. After being accepted, you'll receive more information telling you what to bring or not bring and other stuff your parents will want to know.

Camp is a wonderful experience that no one should miss out on, especially not because of fear. Consider what Isaiah the prophet wrote: "For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you'" (Isaiah 41:13). Whatever



worry or concern you might have about camp, God will help you through it as you come together to meet new friends and learn more about Him! **CC**



Dan Preston pastors the Charlotte and Hickory, North Carolina, and Columbia, South Carolina, congregations of the United Church of God. He still has pictures from his first camp experience, and eventually forgave his mother for making him go to school.



DON'T LIKE CONFLICT? MASTER DISAGREEMENT!

by David Cobb

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ost of us prefer to avoid thinking about it, but the reality is unavoidable—life is *full* of conflict. Regardless of your personality or circumstances, relationships present endless opportunities for every imaginable type of disagreement. Relationship disharmony can manifest in many ways, including misunderstandings, hurt feelings and unfulfilled hopes or expectations.

These early manifestations of conflict can result in a few different outcomes. Ideally, they are recognized, proactively addressed and resolved. Sadly, this is often not the case, and the conflict deepens over time with words and actions that are directly or passively aggressive. Eventually, unresolved conflict leads either to toxic and unhealthy interactions or to a separation that ends the relationship. In either case, broken relationships bring tremendous difficulty and pain, both physically and emotionally.

Before we examine a critical key to mitigating life's constant conflicts, let's understand where it comes from. Why do we have so much trouble getting along?

BOMBARDED FROM OUTSIDE AND WITHIN

The Bible reveals that Satan is our adversary (1 Peter 5:8). He has chosen to be an opponent and enemy of both God and mankind. As humans created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), we are the targets of Satan's constant attacks and accusations (Revelation 12:9-10). These antagonistic moods, attitudes and emotions are broadcast throughout the physical and spiritual atmosphere that we live within (Ephesians 2:1-2). That's right—conflict pervades the very air around us!

Based on those factors alone, it's little wonder that we struggle to live in harmony with one another. Unfortunately, those aren't the only factors. In addition to Satan continually pushing us toward conflict from the outside, our own human nature pushes us toward



WHEN ADDRESSING CONFLICT, OUR FOCUS MUST BE ON THE THINGS THAT WE CAN PERSONALLY CHANGE AND GROW IN—NOT ON THE THINGS THAT WE THINK OTHERS NEED TO CHANGE.

it from within. We are inherently self-focused, and pursuing our own desires continually places us at odds with the other people around us who are busy pursuing theirs.

What happens when the external and internal forces pushing us toward conflict combine? The result is the world that we live in now—a world saturated with *perpetual strife*. Does ongoing conflict solve the problems we experience? No, not really. As folk rock band The Avett Brothers describe it in their song *I and Love and You*: “When at first I learned to speak, I used all my words to fight, with him and her and you and me . . . ah, but it’s just a waste of time . . .”

That’s the bad news, but there’s plenty of counteracting good news too! Like so many aspects of this life that are difficult, God’s way of life provides hopeful alternatives. We gain many benefits from pursuing them in this life. Beyond that, we have the promise of an ultimate life transformation in God’s Kingdom to come! Let’s review some principles from God’s way of life that can help with avoiding conflict—especially through properly handling disagreement.

THE ANSWER IS IN THE MIRROR

There is a key lesson concerning conflict that we must all internalize. Our natural reaction is often to try to change or control something about the people we disagree with. The truth is that we can only change and exercise control over *ourselves*.

The last half of the twelfth chapter of Romans contains some of the Bible’s clearest teaching on what it means to think and behave as a Christian. It includes this profound instruction on how to approach conflict in relationships: “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, *so far as it depends on you*, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18, English

Standard Version, emphasis added throughout).

When avoiding or addressing conflict, our focus must be on the things that we can personally change and grow in—not on the things that we think others need to change.

There is one area of relationship management with positive impact that is regrettably very underused in our society.

CIVIL DISAGREEMENT

Reaching agreement with others is a noble and worthwhile goal. However, it isn’t always possible. There are many benefits to gain from learning to disagree without being disagreeable! Most people have a wide range of relationships in life. These include a broad spectrum of differences in personality, preferences, values and life choices. An average person will disagree about many things with many of the people in their lives.

Disagreeing about things is a normal aspect of all relationships. In healthy relationships, working through disagreement strengthens the relational bonds between individuals. Even in more difficult relationships, disagreement can be properly managed. Careful and



care-filled communication is a major element of not letting disagreement escalate to conflict.

The Bible records a critical and timeless key for communicating in this way: “Let your speech *always be gracious*, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:6, ESV). This passage tells us to make every effort to extend the benefit of gracious communication to others, regardless of whether they deserve it or not! This is especially true when we disagree with someone.

There are many ways to put this into practice.



your responses when possible. Look for opportunities to share kind or encouraging words.

These things are simple to say, but hard to do. When we put in the effort to practice them, especially with God’s help, they will become habits that result in immeasurable blessings!

*“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person”
(Colossians 4:6, ESV).*

When a topic of disagreement arises, start by asking questions about the person’s thoughts or feelings to better understand what they are saying—and just as importantly, what they are *not* saying. Try to wait for them to ask what your views are before stating them. If they don’t ask about your thoughts, it’s often best to just remain quiet on that subject (Proverbs 11:12, 17:28, 29:9).

When someone does ask about your views, respond with the simplest answer that is truthful and kind. Wait to see if additional questions come. If the person is interested in hearing more, their questions will provide context that helps with determining how to best respond. Or, in some cases, whether to not respond and change the subject or excuse yourself from the conversation.

If conditions seem right for an open conversation, state your beliefs and the reasons for them honestly and clearly. Try to ask questions about why the person believes or acts the way they do, and ask them to explain more when something isn’t clear. Listen to their answers, and ask God to help you respond in a way that avoids confrontation and provides the best outcome.

The old saying “calm is contagious” is true! Use a gentle and respectful tone of voice. Identify areas of common ground and use them as reference points in

It’s good to be realistic in our expectations and acknowledge that these habits won’t avoid all disagreements. But with God’s blessing, they can mitigate many levels of conflict and enable healthy and functional relationships between people who are very different from one another.

Society around us is and will continue to be filled with conflict at every level. We can reduce the level of conflict in our own lives by managing the inevitable disagreements in our relationships with civility and grace. To the extent that we do, we can fulfill this inspirational admonition: “Do all things *without complaining or arguments*, so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, *among whom you appear as lights in the world*” (Philippians 2:14-15, New American Standard Bible). **CC**



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COMPASS CHECK

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