

4 Ways Christians Can Use Halloween to Spread God's Love

As we near the Halloween season, many questions are raised about whether one ought to celebrate it or not.

For some these questions extend even beyond Halloween, encompassing Christmas and Easter, in an effort to distance themselves from all things pagan.

If we were to distance ourselves from all things pagan, we'd barely be able to exist in this present culture at all.

To be sure, Halloween's origins are dark, pagan and demonic. I could go into a huge history lesson here—but it really would not serve the purpose for what I want to share. I think the majority of us know Halloween's Celtic origins, how Jack-o-lanterns came to be, why they dressed up and so on.

Additionally, I think we could all agree that the way Halloween is currently celebrated hardly resembles the way it was originally celebrated. It is commercialized and I'd argue that most parents are not focused on the pagan aspects of the holiday—they simply want their children to have a good time.

When the topic comes up among Christians, the opinions are varied and deeply rooted. Some are so steadfastly convinced that all Christians should completely ignore the day along with any kids who come calling.

The Bible does command us to reject—indeed flee from—evil, specifically demons, witches and witchcraft in all its forms.

And to a degree, Halloween falls into that category.

Yet, it begs the question that if we as believers so reject

Halloween as a day, refuse to open our door to trick-or-treating kids, or allow our churches to be a safe haven for those who would otherwise be on the streets, are we missing out on an opportunity to share Christ's love?

Did Jesus turn away sinners in an effort to broadcast a message about sin?

Did Jesus isolate Himself from unbelievers in an effort to protect Himself from pagan customs?

And let us not forget that in His day paganism abounded – as did every other form of wicked behavior.

Turning our lights out and pretending that Halloween doesn't exist doesn't mean that it ceases to exist. Our refusal to acknowledge the day doesn't make it go away.

People still celebrate Halloween—people who need the love of Jesus.

If our quest is to be like Him, let us look to His behavior as an example of how we ought to respond when faced with paganism, evil and even wickedness in our culture.

The church can and should capitalize upon every opportunity presented to bring the gospel to the lost.

So I challenge my readers this year to consider how you might use Halloween to reach out to your neighbors and those you usually do not get a chance to talk with.

4 Ways Christians Can Use Halloween to Spread God's Love

1. Hand out tracts with candy.

When kids come to your home, have a tract ready to hand out with candy. Use this as an opportunity to spread the good news of the gospel.

You can download my tract below and print as many copies of it as you need to spread the gospel to your friends and neighbors this year.

2. Trunk or Treat

Find a church or organization hosting a trunk or treat and get involved with them, or organize one yourself and get your friends and church family involved.

3. Throw a neighborhood party

Get your neighbors together and organize a huge neighborhood block party. You can do a tour of homes or if the weather is warm, host a block party. Give children a safe place to go, and begin building a bridge to your neighbors as an opportunity to share the gospel.

4. Join a church harvest party.

Join your church or a neighboring church in hosting a harvest party. This gives children and their families a safe place to go and gets them off of the streets. It also opens the door for you to spread the gospel.

Don't just ignore Halloween—turn into an opportunity. Be proactive! {eoa}

Rosilind Jukic, a Pacific Northwest native, is a missionary living in Croatia and married to her hero. Together, they live with their two active boys in the country, where she enjoys fruity candles and a hot cup of herbal tea on a blustery fall evening. She holds an associate degree in practical theology and is passionate about discipling and encouraging women. Her passion for writing led her to author a number of books. She is the author of "A Little R & R," where she encourages women to find contentment in what God created them to be. She can also be found at these other places on a regular basis. You may follow her on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Google +.

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Your One True Source of Real Comfort

When I was a kid, I can remember going to church on Sunday nights with my family. After church, Dad would stop and we'd all get ice-cream cones. If it was summer, we'd sit outside at the picnic tables, talk and laugh.

We considered this a true treat because my parents were barely middle class. We lived in an 800-square-foot house with one bath and three small bedrooms. We rarely went out to eat, so getting ice cream from any place besides the small freezer on top of our small refrigerator was a highlight.

I remember those times because of their rarity and the pure joy that accompanied being together with my whole family. As we get older, we go in search of those blissful moments. When we can't find them because all those we love are gone, we try to recreate them. So we do it by going out for ice cream, donuts, brownies, cookies, cakes or fast food of any sort.

Bliss Factor

When we do this, we are looking for that joy element or what the food manufacturers call the "bliss" factor. This is how much sugar a manufacturer can put in a product before the customer actually tastes that there is too much.

It's that perfect blend where the customer says, "Wow, that tastes awesome. I have to have some more." But they don't say, "Yuck, that tastes like pure sugar," even though sugar is the

main ingredient.

The definition of bliss is “perfect happiness or great joy.” That’s how manufacturers sell their product, by delivering exactly what we want: great joy. And foods with high sugar content will give us that in the moment.

More Happiness

The sugar is mainlined to our brain where we get a “high” or a jolt of bliss. But then it wears off fast. When it does, we want more. I mean, who doesn’t want more happiness?

We’ve been programmed to give that to ourselves at special times: birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, baby showers, bridal showers, going-away parties, retirement parties, even funerals.

It’s no wonder when I became an adult what I wanted to do in order to celebrate finishing a big project at work, receiving an award for an article I had written, finishing a publication on or before a deadline, cleaning my house, doing my laundry, getting the grocery shopping done, fixing supper or doing the dishes. I wanted bliss! I wanted to feel happier.

Adult Choices

My choices had grown much larger than a dime ice cream cone. Now, I could bake cookies or brownies or cake, or go get a baker’s dozen of cinnamon crunch bagels, fried cinnamon rolls or huge chocolate chip cookies and eat as much or as many as I wanted.

I knew, in order to feel that special feeling of joy I felt as a child, I needed more of those kinds of food. If that sounds like an addiction, it is.

It is addiction born of a very emotional response to simply wanting to recreate that feeling of happiness I felt as a child eating an ice cream cone with my family or sitting

around my grandmother's table at Sunday dinner and having a myriad of desserts to choose from.

Negative Emotions

It also explains why when we are angry, worried, stressed, frustration, confused, lonely or just plain mad at the world, we go to the foods that recreate in us that feeling of happiness.

This feeling is both emotional and physical because foods high in sugar and carbohydrates, the kinds of foods my mom and grandma called "starches," do evoke a physical feeling of well-being. This gets enmeshed with the emotional memories.

While we are responding with food to what we are feeling, we rarely stop to think about what we are doing, because it feels like the response is just what we have always done. It's how we have reacted since from as far back as we can remember.

It is part of us, but it is part of our memories. We can keep those great memories, but we must recognize where our desire to constantly eat comfort foods comes from and allow God to begin to redirect and heal us. We are trying to feel bliss all the time because the other feelings drive us crazy.

Real Comfort

The truth is that God has provided all that we need in terms of comfort and bliss in the person of the Holy Spirit. He is "the Comforter, Advocate, Intercessor-Counselor, Strengthener, Standby," (John 14:26 AMP).

When I said yes to accepting Christ as my Savior, the Holy Spirit made His home inside my body. "What? Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Cor. 6:19, MEV).

He's always with us. We can go to Him for what we need, but

instead we want the more tangible, physical pleasures that certain foods bring us. How do we change that?

Finding True Bliss

I had to understand that the foods I was thinking were bliss-giving were actually death-bringing. They were contributing to hastening the end of my life here on earth. At 430 pounds, I had been given five years to live. I needed to make some changes, and thank God I did and have lost 250 pounds.

What I learned is that God gave us the only one true Comforter. Certain foods may comfort for a moment, but He brings lasting comfort.

“When God fulfills your longing, sweetness fills your soul” (Prov. 13:19a, TPT). This is true sweetness, true bliss. There is nothing else like it.

God longs to fill us completely with Himself, but we’re so full of the counterfeit sweets that there is no room left over.

We try so hard to make ourselves feel what and how we want to feel. We must let God show us the source of our negative emotions. Let Him comfort you instead of running to false comforts. {eoa}

Teresa Shields Parker *is the author of seven books, all available on Amazon. Her latest book, Sweet Hunger: Developing an Appetite for God, is available now, and Sweet Grace: How I Lost 250 Pounds is the No. 1 Christian weight-loss memoir. She is also a writing and weight-loss coach, blogger, speaker, wife and mother. Visit her online at to find her books, coaching programs and gifts.*

This article originally appeared at .

What Would You Say to a Younger You?

I was listening to a podcast in which Jamie Ivey was interviewing Priscilla Shirer. Jamie asked, "Priscilla, what would you say to your 20-year-old self?" Her response was almost lost to me, because I turned the question on myself and got the most surprising answer.

What would I say to my 20-year-old self, now that I'm almost 30 years past that age? "Somebody you're going to be good at and even enjoy manual labor."

My own statement shocked me—first because it was such a strange gut response and second because I never, ever imagined I would be able to say those words. My young-adult self would probably laugh out loud and say, "Yeah, not gonna happen in this lifetime."

But you know what? It has happened.

It's this crazy year I've lived. We decided to move in with my mother-in-law to help out around her place. So I started packing up our house. For weeks I packed boxes, drove a carload of possessions to my mother-in-law's house and carted those boxes into the house and down the hole into the crawl space. More than a dozen times, I filled the car and unloaded items at the thrift shop.

Trip after trip.

I started fixing and improving things around our house, if I could figure out how, and I started painting.

Then we moved in to my mother-in-law's home, and it required

weeks of physical labor to sort and smoosh our garage and shed belongings into her garage and shed. We also had to hang things and rearrange things and fix some things here.

Then it was spring, and the reason we were here was to do physical chores. So I started mowing and improving some flower beds. I even made some trips to the dump by myself, which was something I was never going to do.

Somewhere in all of that manual drudgery, it started not to be drudgery. I don't know when it happened, you guys. But one day I started to go work outside, and I looked forward to it. Getting sweaty and using my body to work hard sounded appealing. I could feel my body getting stronger, and that was really rewarding.

Who is this person, and what have you done with Christy? Christy—the book reading, piano playing, don't-make-me-sweat girl? The girl who mostly always felt like a lazy good-for-nothing when it came to getting her hands dirty? It's like someone just came in and changed who she was when no one was looking.

Now it's fall, and these mature, beautiful maple trees in my mother-in-law's yard are dropping their leaves. You know what? I can't wait to go out and rake and bag those leaves. *Me.*

I know, right?

Here's the thing. I believe so much about Jesus. I believe He can tell a storm to stop and it stops. I believe He can touch a dead person and bring the person back to life. I believe He can use one small basket of fish and bread to feed thousands. But the hardest thing for me to believe is that Jesus will truly make me into a better person.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says: "Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things have passed away. Look, all things have become new."

But wow, do I have a hard time believing that. I even wrote an entire book about it—that Jesus is, indeed, making us into better people little by little. Except every day I fall short in so many ways, of being the person I know God wants me to be, that despair comes easily. Can I truly ever grow as a person? More than that, can I hold onto *hope* of growing strong inside?

Well, I certainly never could have pictured myself as a 49-year-old woman heading out cheerfully to do really physical chores, yet here I am. So yes, I guess Jesus really has been working in me. Seeing this change in myself bolsters my faith in what Jesus will do in my future.

So what about you? Would you tell your younger self to have hope about being transformed into someone better? {eoa}

This article originally appeared at .

Your Isaiah 61 Encouragement to Persevere Under Trial

Remember the song, “Tall Oaks from Acorns Grow”? It’s a cute children’s song—one I hadn’t thought of in decades ... until I began catching up on long overdue yardwork.

For the past two years, circumstances have caused me to neglect our yard. Shrubs grew wild and leggy. Weeds invaded where flowers should have bloomed. Two years of growth in a state where the growing season is year-round.

The solution to tackling this task is much like the answer to the riddle about how to eat an elephant: one bite at a time.

So in recent weeks, I've trimmed a bit, weeded a lot, pruned the plants I want to keep and cut out the unwanted vegetation. Even with all that work, I've barely made a dent in our abundant Florida growth.

But before discouragement could set in, I realized that in recent days, I've been crunching acorns underfoot. And the children's song came to mind.

We can joke about cliches, but the truth is, the large oak I labored under did indeed start as a tiny acorn. Planted in fertile soil, it simply did what it was created to do: hold its ground and grow.

As I work in the dirt, reflecting on oaks and acorns, I'm reminded that even though it might seem as if my situation is burying me, God is using it to plant me instead.

Still, I need to remember ...

The darkness can be frightening, but His light shines brightest in the dark.

The duration and weight of our circumstances may be painful, but the combination of time and pressure drives us to the one who is our refuge.

And the sense of loneliness in the face of our trials helps us appreciate the intimacy of our relationship with the one who created us, saved us and indwells us with His Holy Spirit.

Thinking about acorns and oaks also reminds me of the passage in Isaiah 61:1-3 (NIV):

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to

preserve those who mourn in Zion, to give to them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He might be glorified.

This prophetic passage pointed to the Messiah—Jesus Christ, the anointed one who would come hundreds of years later to God’s chosen people as their Savior and Lord. It speaks to people who are hurting.

Those who feel buried in dark circumstances.

People in mourning and despair.

People who have been waiting so long that they’ve almost given up hope.

Yet this passage refers to God’s people as “oaks.” Plantings of the Lord for His glory.

Are you feeling discouraged today? In dark despair? Are you convinced your circumstances will bury you because you don’t have the strength to persevere?

Consider yourself planted instead. And know God does not abandon His children, regardless of their situation. Run to Him when you’re lonely. Welcome the light of His presence to dispel the darkness. Trust His perfect timing.

And remember ... oaks from acorns grow. {eoa}

Ava Pennington is a writer, speaker and Bible teacher. She writes for nationally circulated magazines and is published in 32 anthologies, including 25 “Chicken Soup for the Soul” books. She also authored Daily Reflections on the Names of God: A Devotional, endorsed by Kay Arthur. Learn more at .

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Anne Graham Lotz: Facing Death Without Fear

“So then, as the children share in flesh and blood, He likewise took part in these, so that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver those who through fear of death were throughout their lives subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:14-15).

My cancer journey continues as I begin chemotherapy this week. My heart aches for the multitude of people who have also dealt with this deadly disease. Yet I am praising God for His keeping power and for your prayers that I know are sustaining me in a constant state of peace, joy and expectancy of blessings along the way.

I have been told that my prognosis is excellent. But to be honest, even if it wasn't, I can truthfully say I have no fear of death. None at all. My perspective is the same as the apostle Paul when he declared, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”(see Phil. 1:21). As my brother-in-law, Dr. Denton Lotz, stated when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer at the same time I was diagnosed with breast cancer, we are in a win-win situation.

Facing death without fear was eloquently expressed by Jac, the grandson of my husband's brother, John Lotz. Jac's mother knew he had been assigned by his teacher a written report on the person who had greatly impacted his spiritual life, but she didn't know what he had written. After he left for school, she found the following on his computer. She then forwarded it to me. It was such a blessing, I asked Jac if I could share it with you, too, and he agreed.



Denton, Jac and I are looking up!

Anne Graham Lotz, second child of Billy and Ruth Graham, is the founder of AnGeL Ministries and former chairman for the National Day of Prayer Task Force. She has authored 15 books, including her latest, The Daniel Prayer.

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Your Real Response to ‘Why Did You Gain All That Weight?’

Two questions I’m asked a lot are these: “How did you lose 250 pounds?” and “Why did you gain all that weight?” The second question is actually more important than the first.

In order to change anything, we have to know what needs to change. When I weighed 430 pounds what I thought needed to change was my weight. Surely if I lost weight, that would change everything. The problem, though, was I could go on a diet and lose weight, but I couldn’t keep it off.

Why couldn’t I keep the weight off? I hadn’t really changed my mindset. I hadn’t addressed the root cause of why I ate. All I had done was follow a set of rules for around nine to 10 months until the holiday season rolled around, and then I’d throw away the restrictions.

Food was family, love and companionship. Food soothed my soul when those I loved weren’t around. Food was comfort at the end

of a long day. Food kept stress, overwhelm, fear, anxiety, anger, frustration, shame, guilt, bitterness and worry at bay for a short time. Food was the only way I felt I had to keep my emotions on an even keel.

That might have been fine if I defined food as broccoli, carrots and salad. However, real food, the kind I dreamed about and looked forward to, was defined as desserts, cookies, brownies, sweet breads, hot rolls, country fried steak, mashed potatoes and gravy, and so on. For a quick fix, there was the fast-food double cheeseburger, fries and cookie or fried pie.

Right now, it makes me sick just to think about all the foods I used to eat just to stop myself from being what I considered a raving lunatic. I'm so grateful God helped turn me around and face the issues inside me that needed to be changed. I was trying to control my emotions by eating them away.

This worked for a short time, like 30 minutes to an hour, but then I'd be back in the kitchen, grazing for something else to fill the ache inside. Negative emotions have physical feelings attached to them, and so it makes sense, on some level, to shove food inside us to try to attack those feelings. But when the high we get from the overload of sugars and carbohydrates wear off, we need more of the same food to take the edge off.

If this sounds like addictive behavior, it is. The problem is we do need to eat to live. Our tendency to overeat to take care of emotions get confused with the actual physical need we have for food.

God made our bodies perfectly. Our body is not the problem. The way we have programmed ourselves to take care of emotions is the problem. The great thing about this is, we are the ones who can reprogram ourselves.

First, though, we have to realize that we have allowed food to become our central focus instead of God. That means food has now become our god instead of the one true God. We run to food

to comfort ourselves, be our companion, protect us, provide for us and make us feel better. All of that can be found in God. We must recommit to allowing God to be God in our lives.

Paul shares a big truth about this with us. “‘All things are lawful to me,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be brought under the power of anything” (1 Cor. 6:12).

We can be saved and overeat to our pleasure. It is not forbidden, but it will be of no good to us. As a matter of fact, if we allow it to control us, it will lead us to an early death and an absence of purpose and destiny. We will get only the foods we want, the momentary pleasure, not the eternal reward.

God gives us sweet grace for our failures. He is patient and long-suffering with us, giving us chance after chance, not just to lose weight, but to understand how to live the abundant lives Jesus died to give us.

Everything changed when I surrendered my desire for sugar and comfort foods to God. I lost over 250 pounds, and I gained a closer relationship with God. It all began when I admitted I was using food to try to control my emotions rather than understanding how to deal with them. {eoa}

Teresa Shields Parker *is the author of seven books, all available on Amazon. Her latest book, Sweet Hunger: Developing an Appetite for God, is available now, and Sweet Grace: How I Lost 250 Pounds is the No. 1 Christian weight-loss memoir. She is also a writing and weight-loss coach, blogger, speaker, wife and mother. Visit her online at to find her books, coaching programs and gifts.*

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Don't Let Labels Dictate Who You Are

Been thinking about labels lately. How we assign them to ourselves and to others.

Of all the seasons of my life, junior high school was the most painful. Labels ruled and cliques reigned. You were labeled if you belonged to a group and labeled if you didn't.

Smart. Stupid.

Pretty. Ugly.

Jock. Nerd.

Popular. Loser.

Adults used to be subtler about the use of labels. Not anymore. The words are often spit out with venom usually reserved for the lowest of the low.

Liberal. Conservative.

Democrat. Republican.

Intellectual. Religious fanatic.

This week, I came face to face with another label. It happened in a doctor's office as I completed one of several forms.

The first 20 years of my life I was "single."

Then I spent the next 40 years "married."

Now I'm face to face with a new label: "widow."

Single. Married. Widow.

Who knew that checking a box on a form would cause me to rethink my identity? And yet it did.

But is that really my identity? Or is it simply a description of my status?

The last two months have given me the opportunity to consider who I am. What is my primary identity?

I was an executive ... and now I'm not.

I was a wife ... and now I'm not.

I'm an author now.

I'm a teacher now.

I'm a widow now.

My employment status and my marital status are subject to change. But one thing will never change. One label describes me now and for all eternity.

I am a Christian.

That means I'm a child of God. A daughter of the Creator of the universe.

I have:

- A living hope (1 Pet. 1:3).
- An imperishable inheritance (1 Pet.1:4).
- The seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14).
- Eternal life that has already begun (John 5:24).

Checking a box on a piece of paper describes my circumstances. But it doesn't come close to describing who I am ... and who I always will be.

Priscilla Shirer says it better than I can:

Who are you? {eoa}

Ava Pennington is a writer, speaker and Bible teacher. She writes for nationally circulated magazines and is published in 32 anthologies, including 25 Chicken Soup for the Soul books. She also authored Daily Reflections on the Names of God: A Devotional, endorsed by Kay Arthur. Learn more at .

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Why You Need to Stop Eating Your Emotions

Trying to get rid of unwanted emotions is like trying to get rid of the gnat that keeps buzzing around your head. The more you focus on trying to get rid of it, the more it keeps bugging you.

The same is true of those pesky emotions that try to overtake us. We don't know what to do with them, so we swat at them with something to get rid of them, if only temporarily.

What we want to do with the gnat is kill it or at least make it go bother someone else. What we want to do with our emotions is make them go away as well.

My way of dealing with difficult feelings was always to eat them away. And let me tell you, emotions taste really good at first, but when the high crashes, the shame and remorse kick in and trigger another onset of emotional angst. Then emotions taste really crummy.

It's a habit loop that is really difficult to break. It's one that I got caught in more times than I care to admit.

When I was gaining weight, feeling as though there were no end to my desire for sugar and comfort foods, I felt the problem was that I just loved food more than anyone else. If I thought anyone cared, I would have yelled, "Help; I can't stop eating."

I didn't read things about emotional eating because I didn't think I ate out of an emotional need. Unknowingly, I had adopted a lifestyle of overeating in order to manage my emotions. So of course I wasn't sad and depressed, sitting in a corner eating bonbons. I just ate all the time to keep from being a raving lunatic.

I had this habit loop honed to such a science that it just felt like who I was. In a way, that was true. I refused to be sad, overwhelmed, depressed, angry, stressed, ashamed, afraid or lonely. All those emotions had foods to go with them.

Overwhelmed and stressed? Bake Grandma's oatmeal cookies. Sad or depressed? Fix a comfort food supper of country-fried steak, fried potatoes, gravy and hot rolls. Angry or lonely? Go through fast food. Afraid or ashamed? Eat a bag of my favorite caramels and hide in my bedroom.

I wanted the emotions to settle down and behave themselves. Problem is, they were still there. I just happened to bury them a little deeper.

The other reason I didn't think I was responding to emotions was because it was always a trigger of some kind that I was actually responding to.

Triggers are tricky. They are rather illusive and only appear at random times. For instance, there was one day at work when I got first place in a national competition for writing. I was on top of the world because I hadn't even applied! One of my supervisors had submitted the article for me.

Now this should be a time of rejoicing, right? Instead the

head of my department got second place and barely spoke to me the rest of the day. It was not me being paranoid. My supervisor who submitted for me even noticed.

She said, "Don't worry. It's just that she's always wanted a first place for writing from that organization. Just lie low and don't make a big deal of it."

I should have been happy for myself and I was, but it was overshadowed by the anger my boss was expressing towards me. All of a sudden, I felt ashamed because I had won. Instead of talking to someone about it or journaling, I went back to my cubicle and found the bag of caramels I had stashed there and ate the entire bag.

One reason this upset me so much is because I always got good grades growing up, but my mother would tell me I didn't deserve those grades. This feeling followed me even into my big-girl jobs and kept me from really accepting any honors I got.

These are the feelings that trigger the habit loop that causes us to find some way to make the emotions go away. So we eat, and they do go away. We get a high, and we feel good or at least feel as though we can manage life. Then we begin to come to our senses and start to realize what we just did. This causes us to feel shame, remorse, even anger at ourselves for giving it yet one more time.

Then we can do one of two things: We can realize what we've done and begin to recognize the triggers, put good habits in place to help us deal with the emotions and stop the habit loop, or we can eat those negative feelings away again as soon as we can to keep those feelings at bay. The second choice triggers the habit loop again.

We feel inept when we once again choose the second choice. But the truth is, we have a secret weapon to get through these issues. We have a Savior who understands that in our humanity

we are weak.

That's the whole reason Jesus came and lived as a human among us. He identifies with our weaknesses. He does. He knows how it feels to be tempted and yet say no. His very first recorded temptation was to turn stones into bread, and He was surely hungry after fasting for 40 days.

“He understands humanity, for as a Man, our magnificent King-Priest was tempted in every way just as we are, and conquered sin. So now we come freely and boldly to where love is enthroned, to receive mercy's kiss and discover the grace we urgently need to strengthen us in our time of weakness” (Heb. 4:15-16 TPT). {eoa}

Teresa Shields Parker is the author of seven books, all available on Amazon. Her latest book, Sweet Hunger: Developing an Appetite for God, is available now, and Sweet Grace: How I Lost 250 Pounds is the No. 1 Christian weight-loss memoir. She is also a writing and weight-loss coach, blogger, speaker, wife and mother. Visit her online at to find her books, coaching programs and gifts.

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6 Ways Eastern Meditation Differs From Biblical Meditation

We live in a very stressed-out culture that is constantly looking for ways to unwind and de-stress. Just about any doctor or health expert will tell you to do one thing:

meditate.

By meditate they mean an Eastern form of meditation: Zen meditation, transcendental meditation, yoga, Chinese or Hindu meditation, guided meditation—all of which have their origins in new age and Eastern religions.

But the meditation God was talking about in Joshua 1:8 differs greatly from Eastern meditation. In fact, I'll go so far as to say that participating in any form of meditation, apart from biblical meditation, is opening the door wide to the enemy.

I shared a little about this in my earlier post: Will God Protect You From Adult Coloring Books, when we looked at the adult coloring books with mandalas and why this is a dangerous practice for Christians.

Any time we mix Christian discipline with any other religious practice, we anger God.

In the Old Testament, God said this:

When the Lord your God shall cut off the nations from before you, where you go to possess them, and you dispossess them, and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself so that you are not ensnared by following them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you not inquire after their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? Even so I will do likewise." You shall not do so to the Lord your God, for every abomination to the Lord, which He hates, they have done to their gods. They have even burned their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.

Whatever I command you, be careful to do it. You shall not add to it or take away from it (Deut. 12:29-32).

Throughout the Bible, God calls himself "jealous."

He has commanded us to keep our worship pure and undefiled by

the worship of other gods. You may argue, “But I’m not using these other forms of meditation for worship.” However, as Christians, whatever we do in our life *should* be to glorify God, and if anything we’re doing does *not* glorify God—but, in fact, is used to glorify another god—we should immediately reject it and eliminate it from our lives.

This includes yoga, which many Christians engage in as a stress-relieving form of exercise. When you examine its origins and meaning, you can easily see why yoga has no place in the life of the believer.

However, like any other Christian discipline, biblical meditation should be part of our daily practice: speaking the Word, muttering it to ourselves, mulling over it and imagining how our lives should fit in its context.

This takes the Word to a much deeper level than reading, studying, praying and even memorizing as we contemplate deeply what each passage actually means for us personally and speaking it over and over to ourselves.

6 Ways Eastern Meditation Differs From Biblical Meditation

1. Eastern meditation empties the mind. Biblical meditation fills the mind and spirit with God’s Word. Emptying our mind is actually a very dangerous thing because it gives the enemy room to fill it with his deception. However, the Hebrew word for “meditation” means “to speak or mutter,” a practice that does the opposite of Eastern meditation. It fills our mind with God’s Word and builds our spirit.

2. Eastern meditation focuses on self: centering yourself; your inner self; self-actualization; your breathing, physical feelings and emotions. The enemy will do anything to get us to stop focusing on Christ. Furthermore, his ultimate deception is pride or elevation of self. Biblical meditation takes our focus off ourselves and places it on Jesus Christ.

3. Eastern meditation seeks to relieve stress. The problem with our culture isn't stress. Stress is only a symptom of a deeper problem: pride. Worry, fear, perfectionism—these all have their root in pride, and all result in stress. But God wants us to daily walk in faith that brings us peace no matter our circumstance. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

Christians absolutely shouldn't turn to anything other than Jesus Christ for the peace that will help to ease whatever it is that has brought on stress in their lives.

4. Eastern meditation focuses on man being in control. Eastern meditation practices rely on self as the agent to bring peace, tranquility and oneness with deity—the original lie: "You can become like God." Biblical meditation reminds us God is Almighty, and when He is in control, we can be at complete peace, knowing His purposes will prevail. Eastern meditation dethrones God and puts fallen man in His place.

5. Eastern meditation is only escapism. By seeking higher levels of consciousness or altered states of consciousness, you can escape your stress and enter new realms of oneness with deity. But the fact remains that once we have returned to our usual state of consciousness, whatever brought on the stress is still there. Biblical meditation doesn't give us an escape from reality, it gives us supernatural strength through the Holy Spirit to walk through the "fire and flood" at peace, knowing that God is in control of every situation. We don't need to escape our troubles; by faith, we walk through them, counting it all joy, "knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience."

6. Eastern meditation manipulates circumstances to bring peace. By using atmosphere, objects, silence, breathing techniques and more, people are able to enter a meditative

state. It's a manipulation of circumstances and atmosphere. However, the child of God can meditate on God's Word whenever, wherever, no matter the situation or circumstance, because we have direct access to the throne of God. Indeed, we are the temple of God and His Holy Spirit dwells within us. We never need to manipulate any situation to experience peace; we simply recall the precious promises of the Word of God and place our faith and trust in Him.

How to Engage in Biblical Meditation

The Lord spoke to Joshua and said this:

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go (Josh. 1:8-9).

The Hebrew word for meditate used here is *hagah*, meaning "to speak, mutter, muse, imagine or plot."

Biblical meditation is the repeated speaking of the Word of God. It also involves imagining and using the mind to plan ways we can implement the Word of God in our lives.

You do this by taking a passage of the Word and repeating it over to yourself, examining each word and imagining how it applies to your personal life.

As we begin to make biblical meditation a part of our daily Christian discipline; speaking, muttering the Word of God and imagining how we can mold our lives in concordance with it, we will see our lives transformed, and the Lord promises you "will make your way prosperous" and then you will "have success."

Do we believe the Word in this? {eoa}

Rosilind Jukic, a Pacific Northwest native, is a missionary living in Croatia and married to her hero. Together, they live with their two active boys in the country, where she enjoys fruity candles and a hot cup of herbal tea on a blustery fall evening. She holds an associate degree in practical theology and is passionate about discipling and encouraging women. Her passion for writing led her to author a number of books. She is the author of "A Little R & R," where she encourages women to find contentment in what God created them to be. She can also be found at these other places on a regular basis. You may follow her on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Google +.

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Unwrap This Glorious Gift so You Can Move Into Complete Freedom

What if God said, "I give you a choice. Will it be salvation or sugar?" What would your answer be?

Of course, it's not as simple as that. Or is it?

Throughout the Scriptures, God tells us we have a choice. We can choose the free gift He sent us in Jesus or we can go our own way. When I was 7, I said yes to the free gift of grace, but I didn't really understand what a glorious gift I had.

It feels as though I loved the thought of the gift of grace, but just left that gift, still wrapped, on the coffee table of my life. Maybe I was waiting for the right time to unwrap it

completely? Or maybe I just liked the thought of having a gift from God.

Following the Rules

For the next 40 years, I continued following all the church rules I'd been taught since birth. I didn't drink alcohol, have sex before marriage, do drugs, dance, curse or go to wild parties. I didn't even go into movie theaters, wear makeup or shorts as those were things my pastor dad disapproved of.

I was doing things for Jesus. I worked in ministry. I taught Sunday school, went to church every time the doors were open, served on committees and did volunteer work. And I was eating all the desserts, comfort foods and sugary treats I wanted because that seemed to be an acceptable Christian thing to do.

When my extreme weight gain caught up with me, I would go on diets, which are really a set of rules. I would lose weight, but I'd also gain it right back again. That gift of grace still sat undisturbed on the coffee table of my life. I still had it. I just didn't know what it was all about.

I wasn't following Christ. I was following rules that I thought meant I was following Him. Jesus had shown me back in 1977 that my health issues and weight gain came from eating sugar and bread.

He clearly showed me I needed to stop eating them, but giving them up seemed like just a suggestion from Him. I didn't understand He was showing me the way out of the prison I had made for myself. Following Him meant I had to listen and make good choices. That's harder than following diet rules. Way harder.

Romans 7:19 Thoughts

I always thought I was like Paul in Romans 7:19 where he said, "The good I desire to do, I do not do, but the evil I do not

want is what I do.” Then a podcast threw a big ringer into my thinking.

For years I’ve thought Paul was talking about himself as a Christian struggling with following God to do the right thing. I thought he was like me struggling with giving up sugar. Then the speaker said that Paul was talking about his life before meeting Christ.

This presented a big problem in my thinking because I was saved when I was doing what I knew wasn’t right. It messed with my theology of salvation. What does salvation really mean? Was I saved back when I was 7 or sometime along the way between then and now? Was it when I really did choose Him over sugar?

Come-to-Jesus Moment

It was about 10 years ago. I was listening to a former alcoholic tell his story. He had been sober for more than 20 years. In the middle of his story, he said, “Alcohol is one molecule away from sugar. Alcohol is liquid sugar.”

I have often called this my “Come-to-Jesus moment” because it was such a real feeling. It was a visceral feeling, like a sucker punch to my gut. In that moment I realized I was a sugar addict, if there even was such a thing. Back then, I hadn’t heard anyone talking about sugar addiction, and I don’t think I was even on social media.

I asked him if there was such a thing as a sugar addict. He said to me, “I don’t know about the physical part of it, but I know you can be addicted to anything that controls you.” Then, I realized that I had allowed sugar to control me instead of God.

I surrendered processed sugar, and eventually flour and gluten, to God. That day, I made the decision to give up sugar, but I had no idea how to do it.

There is a process to any change we make, and if we really want to make a change, we will follow the process to exchange our unhealthy habits for healthy ones. I've lost over 250 pounds, but it was and still is a process. It's a process of learning, changing and growing deeper in love with that glorious gift of God's grace, now unwrapped and being used completely to change my life.

The Process of Salvation

Remember Paul? He was zealous about following the law, which He had been taught led to God. He had his own come-to-Jesus moment where the way to God that he knew literally collided with the truth of Christ on the road to Damascus, (Acts 9:1-22)

His encounter with Christ led him to write this to the church at Philippi, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For God is the One working in you, both to will and to do His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12b-13).

Before that glorious grace-moment, he was on a God-journey. He thought he had the truth, but God surprised him so that He could start His journey and be progressively changed into the dynamic apostle he became. When he encountered the reality of Christ, he saw truth, admitted he was wrong and began following the right way.

Paul's story is my story, only I wasn't killing anyone except myself. I had made sugar and comfort foods my god. I had allowed them to become more important than God.

Folks, we are all on a journey. We are saved by God's glorious grace the moment we choose Him. When we unwrap the totality of that gift, we realize it is there to lead us into the truth we cannot possibly understand on our own.

It's there to rescue us and turn us around when we get things wrong. It's there to convince us that following Jesus is the

right way. That's what His *Sweet Grace* finally did for me. It helped me discover there is complete freedom only when I follow Him.

Losing Weight and Keeping It Off

Somehow we figure following someone else's diet will be easier for us to lose weight and instantly become healthy, but losing weight isn't the hard part. We've all done that.

The hard part is keeping it off by learning how to exchange unhealthy habits for healthy ones. The hard part is learning how to deal with our emotions instead of trying to eat them away. The hard part is accepting that maybe, just maybe, there are some things we can't eat that others can.

There is an easy part though. The easy part is following God in what you eat, how you move and how you live. The easy part is knowing you are smack-dab in the middle of continuing to grow in the grace and the knowledge of who Jesus is.

The easy part is understanding that you don't have to be perfect in the way you think of perfection. You only have to be continually "growing into spiritual maturity both in mind and character, actively integrating godly values into your daily life," (Matt. 5:48, AMP).

Just be willing to always be changing and never ever get stuck in thinking you have it all figured out. Let Jesus show you how to live the life that includes growing into who He meant you to be.

What's Your Choice?

So how would you answer God's question? Would you choose salvation or sugar? I really don't think the choice is as simple as that. But if it is, I choose salvation. I choose to explore every nook and cranny of the depths of His glorious grace. {eoa}

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