

Twilight Phenomenon Gets Mixed Reaction From Christians

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Since 2005, Mormon author Stephenie Meyer's four novels about a vampire named Edward Cullen who hunts game rather than humans and falls in love with teenager Bella Swan have sold more than 70 million copies. The film adaptation of the first book, *Twilight*, generated \$384 million.

In Forks, Wash., where the Twilight series is set, tourism jumped from 18,000 in 2008 to more than 64,000 so far this year. Christians in the town of 3,200 say interest in the books has not only bolstered the local economy but also created a new mission field.

"Instead of us going into a foreign mission field, God is bringing people here," said Jim Chase, pastor of Forks Assembly of God. "We do friendship evangelism. We show them Christ by our actions, we show them Christ by our attitude."

Member Merle Watson, 79, says he's been able to witness to at least 1,000 people since tourists started checking into the Forks hotel where he works to spend a day visiting sites mentioned in the books. Most, he said, are drawn to the story's romance. One college-age woman even began to cry as

she told him about the book's appeal. "I would give anything if someone loved me like that," the woman told him.

"I know I'm getting shot down by some people who say I'm making evil good because vampires and werewolves, they're evil," Watson said. "But the people that are coming in here are searching for love. I think if the churches are not meeting this need, we're failing; we're falling short. It's just love they're looking for."

Youth minister Kimberly Powers takes a similar view. After talking with dozens of Twilight fans, she found that the books tapped into a deep longing for love and meaning.

"The girls weren't coming for the vampires, they were coming for the love story," said Powers, co-founder of Walk the Talk Youth Ministries and author of *Escaping the Vampire*. (Read more about vampire-themed Christian books.)

"These girls are just longing to be accepted," she added. "I've seen this for years and years. This is just another way of drawing them."

Powers wants her book and a forthcoming conference series to compel Twilight readers to see Jesus as their rescuer and hero.

"I want girls to think, *I thought Edward Cullen was the thing, but wow, Jesus is truly my rescuer and hero,*" Powers said. "There just is no comparison. They can get swept up in God's epic story of love. Why settle for fiction when you can have the real thing?"

Iowa minister Bill Schnoebelen, a former Satanist who practiced vampirism for several years, says Christians should avoid Twilight altogether. Unlike fantasies such as *The Lord of the Rings*, Twilight can spur a dangerous fascination with the occult, he says.

Since Anne Rice's novel *Interview With the Vampire* and the subsequent film adaptation, Schnoebelen said interest in vampirism has been slowly increasing as a subset of Satanism and the Goth subculture. Now, he says, hundreds of people drink blood as part of vampire cults.

"Yes, [Twilight] is partly fantasy, but there are people who do these things," he said. "It's a false religion."

Even though many Twilight fans may not explore vampirism, he said the books are giving it a dark kind of glamour. "It's a hard thing to get out of," said Schnoebelen, who came to Christ in 1984 and now leads With One Accord Ministries to help others find deliverance from occultism. "If it wasn't for the grace of God I'd either be dead or insane somewhere."

Schnoebelen's concerns are not only about the book's spiritual content. Having earned a master's degree in counseling in 1990, he said Bella's relationship with Edward is equally problematic.

"She's totally destroyed when he goes away," Schnoebelen said. "The only way she can have any kind of peace is when she goes and does some risky behavior. ... She can't exist without this young vampire man. When you think that these books target teen girls, I think that's very reprehensible."

Author Beth Felker Jones, an assistant professor of theology at Wheaton College, has similar concerns.

"Bella ... is willing to erase herself, give up all her plans, her hopes, her dreams," said Jones, who examines Twilight's themes in *Touched by a Vampire*. "She becomes only about her love and not about anything else in her life, and I think that's not such a great image of what love ought to be with us or for us."

Jones encourages Christians to make their own decision about whether to read the books or watch the films, but she says

those do so should view Twilight through “Christ-centered” eyes.

Some Christian parents applaud the books’ promotion of abstinence or the pro-life message presented when Bella faces a life-threatening pregnancy. But Jones worries about Christians’ willingness to jump on popular bandwagons if there’s even a hint of light.

“Yes, the characters wait until they’re married, but ... at the end of the day, [the books] are still very erotically charged,” Jones said. “They’re still about wanting in really deep ways and that’s tied to danger because he’s a vampire. There’s more to think about than just to say: ‘Oh look, these folks wait. Isn’t it great to finally have some book in which this happens.’”

Pastor Chase of Forks Assembly of God neither encourages nor discourages his members from reading the books or watching the movie. He says attacks against the Harry Potter books a few years back only made the children in his church want to read them.

“Banning books ... causes people to want to run toward it more,” he said. “What we need to be worried about is being Christ to these people as they come to town.”

‘The Blind Side’ Spotlights Christian Family

✘ *The Blind Side*, starring Sandra Bullock and Tim McGraw, is undeniably inspirational. At a recent screening, many

viewers were openly in tears.

But Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy, the Christian couple at the center of the film that opens Friday, hope the story of how they adopted a homeless black teenager who eventually became a first-round NFL draft pick does more than make people cry.

Evangelist Distributes Darwin's 'Origin' With Intelligent Design Intro

✘ Evangelist Ray Comfort and actor Kirk Cameron joined 1,200 Christians Wednesday in distributing 170,000 copies of Charles Darwin's evolution manifesto *The Origin of Species*—which features a 50-page introduction refuting Darwin's theory—at 100 universities across the nation.

Comfort initially planned to distribute copies of *The Origin of Species: 150th Anniversary Edition* at college campuses today, but atheists and students had threatened “unilateral resistance,” including book burnings and protests, according to Comfort's Living Waters ministry.

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Objectives Versus Obstacles

Focus on your objectives and not your obstacles. Most people look at situations from a negative vantage point. ·

- What if something bad happens?
- Will I have enough money to do this?

- How will I get this done?

Looking at the difficulties causes people to be problem oriented rather than goal oriented. It is easy to get hung up on the obstacles along the way and lose the joy of accomplishing the goal. Some of the obstacles may only be the imagination of problems and not the reality of the situation.

President John F. Kennedy was a man who overcame many obstacles in life. While he was on active duty in the Pacific, the Japanese destroyed the boat under his command. Despite a back injury, he showed great heroism in rescuing his crew. Kennedy once said "A man does what he must – in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers and pressures – and that is the basis of all human morality."

Do what you must do. Do it in spite of the obstacles on your path.

- What if something good happens?
- What if you locate enough money to finish the task?
- What if you find yourself accomplishing something you never thought you could do?

Keep a positive viewpoint and you'll achieve your goals despite the obstacles designed to hinder you.

Two Kinds of Wisdom

James 2:18-3:18 There are two kinds of wisdom we can experience here on earth. We can experience the wisdom of this world or heavenly wisdom. Earlier in this letter James tells us that if any man lack wisdom, he should ask God, and God

will grant him wisdom. The kind of wisdom God gives is described as follows: “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17).

Christian Sisters Released From Iranian Prison

✘ Two sisters jailed in Iran for more than eight months after refusing to renounce their Christian faith were released Wednesday.

Maryam Rustampoor, 27, and Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmaeilabad, 30, were arrested March 5 on charges of “acting against state security” and “taking part in illegal gatherings.”

During an August court hearing, the women were pressured to renounce their faith in verbal and written form, but both refused. “If we come out of prison we want to do so with honor,” they said after the hearing, according to Elam Ministries, which supports Christians in Iran and has advocated for the women’s release.

As a result of their response, the judge sent the sisters back to prison “to think about it,” Compass Direct News reported. At a court hearing in October, the judge dropped the anti-state charge, but the women still faced charges of propagation of Christianity and apostasy.

“Words are not enough to express our gratitude to the Lord and to His people who have prayed and worked for our release,” the sisters told Elam Wednesday.

Rostampour and Esmaeilabad were held in the notorious Evin prison, a facility that has drawn criticism in recent years for its human rights violations. Sources say the sisters were put in solitary confinement and subjected to intense interrogations.

Esmaeilabad also suffered from spinal pain, an infected tooth and intense headaches but was reportedly denied medical attention for a time. In October Rostampour had severe food poisoning.

“Maryam and Marzieh have greatly inspired us all,” said Elam director Sam Yeghnazar. “Their love for the Lord Jesus and their faithfulness to God has been an amazing testimony.”

Open Doors, a group that advocates for persecuted Christians, launched a campaign to free the women. The group called on supporters to contact Mohammad Khazaei, Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations, and to the Iranian government requesting the sisters’ immediate release.

David Yeghnazar, Elam’s U.S. director, said it is not clear why the women were released, but he credits prayer. He notes that roughly 17,000 people have spent at least a month interceding for Iran as part of Elam’s Iran 30 prayer campaign.

“We’re not sure of the exact reasons for their release, but certainly people have been praying for their situation,” he told *Charisma*.

Although the U.S. State Department designated Iran as a country of “particular concern” for its religious repression, hundreds of thousands of Iranians have reportedly come to Christ in recent years. Many converts report having dreams and visions of Jesus that led them to salvation.

Yet amid the growth of underground churches, government intimidation of Christians has been increasing. Elam leaders

say last year there were more than 50 known cases of arrests and imprisonment, and some cases of torture.

Despite their release, the sisters may face further legal battles. “They’ve been told there will be a future court hearing, so prayers continue to be needed,” David Yeghnazar said. “What we don’t want to happen is that people think, ‘They’re out. We don’t need to keep praying for them.’ ... I really believe that people’s prayers are making a difference.”

The Witness of the Holy Spirit

✘ If you’ve ever read any written accounts of true revivals in past ages, you know about the powerful ways in which God moved upon the people, both inside and outside the church. But you may not be aware that when these powerful manifestations of God took place, many other things—things that were not of God—came in also. Strong fleshly shows and demonic take-offs tried to discredit the move. Without the discernment present to separate the precious from the vile, there was a kind of chaos.

Video: Pam Cope Interview

Pam Cope didn’t close her heart when she learned about vulnerable African orphans. Today she is reaching children around the world. Watch her story.

{youtubejw}f3BiGYsq05g{/youtubejw}

Steps to Totally Forgiving Others

Since forgiveness is a choice, what is the next step? If we are persuaded that it is right and have decided to do it (and not look back), what next?

1. Make the deliberate and irrevocable choice not to tell anyone what they did.

You may need to do this for therapeutic reasons, but only to one person who in turn will never reveal your heart. Jesus also said that the one who is faithful in the least thing is faithful also in much, and this is the first thing. Do not mention it; refuse to tell anybody.

This isn't necessarily easy sometimes, but when our motive is to hurt another person by telling on them, there is sin on our part. So do not tell it at all or in part; keep it quiet.

2. Be pleasant to them should you be around them.

Do not say or do anything that would make them anxious. Put them at ease. This can be hard to do, certainly harder than the first step. It is we who are afraid when we can't forgive. When we pass our fear to them, it is utterly the opposite of what Jesus would do. He would say, "Fear not." Josif Tson says that there are 366 statements of "Do not fear" (or the

equivalent) in the Bible-“One for every day of the year and one for leap year!” he says. God does not want us to fear; we must not do or say anything to cause others to fear. Be nice. Put them at ease. This is what Jesus did when He turned up after His resurrection to 10 disciples behind closed doors. (See John 20:19).

3. If conversation ensues, say that which would set them free from guilt.

Guilt is most painful, and we can easily punish people by sending them on a “guilt trip.” Never do that. Remember that Jesus doesn’t want us to feel guilty. When we are going to be Jesus to another, then we will not want them to be angry with themselves.

This is a hard one. We get some satisfaction when we think they feel really, really bad. That defuses us and eases our anger somewhat. But if we want to be valiant and utterly magnanimous—thus showing true godliness—we will say whatever is the equivalent of Joseph’s words: “Do not be angry with yourselves” (Gen. 45:5). Joseph would not allow his brothers to feel guilty, and this is a choice we too must make. It’s hard, but it is what we would want if things were reversed and we needed forgiveness. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31).

4. Let them feel good about themselves.

Not only does this mean never reminding them of their wrong and your hurt, but it also means helping them through any guilt they may have. This can be done without any reference to what they did. If it is not in the open, as with Joseph’s situation, that is of course different; he let his brothers save face by showing God’s sovereign strategy in their sin. But in many cases you will not be able to talk about anything specifically. You can still let them save face, because you know that they know what they did.

You therefore must behave as though you don’t even think they

did anything wrong! That is hard for all of us, but it must be done. Say whatever you can (as long as it is true) that will give that person a sense of dignity. That is the point of Galatians 6:1: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." As long as there is a trace of self-righteousness and pointing the finger, your attempt at total forgiveness will backfire.

5. Protect them from their greatest fear.

If you are aware of some deep, dark secret and fear they have, they will probably know that you know. If they can tell by your graciousness that their secret will never be revealed—ever—to anyone, they will be relieved. You only tell them when you know they know what you know, and you are convinced this would make them feel better. If by reminding them it would obviously not make them feel better, don't even come close!

Remember that Joseph knew his brothers' greatest fear was that their father, Jacob, would learn the truth of their evil deed. Joseph never mentioned this directly but suggested they speak to Jacob in such a way that they wouldn't have to tell him after all. (See Genesis 45:9-13.) It must have given the brothers incalculable relief to know that they were not obliged to tell Jacob. But that is what total forgiveness is all about: setting people free.

6. Keep it up today, tomorrow, this year and next.

Total forgiveness is a lifelong commitment. Some days will be easier than others. There will come a time when you think you are completely over it and have won a total victory—only to find the very next day Satan reminds you of what they did and the utter injustice that they will be unpunished and never exposed. The temptation to bitterness will emerge. After all, we're not perfect! If we say we have no sin—that we are incapable of the same old bitterness—we are deceived (1 John 1:8).

This is exactly why I read Luke 6:37 every day: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” All commitments to forgive need renewal. In my case, daily. I am not telling you that this is what you must do, but be warned: the devil is cunning. He will come through the back door unexpectedly and try to upset you for forgiving. When you forgave your enemy, you then and there removed that open invitation to the devil to get inside. Satan’s favorite rationale is bitterness—he therefore will keep trying to get back into your thought life.

Whether it be Luke 6:37 or another way forward in your case—even if you aren’t required to keep it up each day—I can tell you right now that it is only a matter of time before your commitment to forgive will need to be renewed.

7. Pray for them.

“But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). When you do this from the heart—praying for them to be blessed and off the hook—you’re there. It is not a perfunctory prayer, not a “We commit them to You” prayer, and certainly not an “Oh God, please deal with them” prayer. It is praying that God will forgive them—that is, overlook what they have done and bless and prosper them as though they’d never sinned at all.

But as John Calvin said, doing this is “exceedingly difficult.” As Chrysostom said, it is the very highest summit of self-control. “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city” (Prov. 16:32).

Praying for the one who has hurt you or let you down is the greatest challenge of all, for all three reasons:

1. You take a route utterly against the flesh.
2. Nobody will every know you are doing it.

3. Your heart could break when God answers that prayer and truly blesses them as if they'd never sinned.

And yet Jesus's word to pray for such people is not a polite suggestion; it is a command—and one that may seem so outrageous that you want to dismiss it out of hand. Some see it as a lofty but unrealistic goal.

I remember a church leader turning to me to pray about his son-in-law who had been unfaithful to the leader's daughter. He said to me that his own prayer was only this: that God would "deal" with this man. "This is where I have to come to," he said to me, "that God will deal with him."

I understood what he meant, and I felt for him. I find what people do to our own offspring the hardest things to forgive. I therefore understood what he was feeling. A few days later it was reported that this leader's son-in-law had been in a serious accident. This same church leader was on the phone, glad that the accident had happened. Now in this particular case there was nothing sinister in this euphoria. He simply hoped that the accident would wake up his son-in-law to put his marriage back together. It was so understandable.

But this is not what Jesus means. He is commanding us to pray that our enemy will be blessed. If, however, you should pray that they will be cursed or punished instead of being blessed, just remember that is how your enemy possibly feels about you. After all, have you ever been someone's enemy? Have you ever done something that brought a fellow Christian to tears and brokenness? If so, how would you like that person to pray for you? That God will deal with you? That God will cause you to have an accident? Yet how would it make you feel if they prayed that you would be blessed and let off the hook? That you would prosper as if you'd never sinned? Would you not like that? "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31).

Jesus wants a sincere prayer from us. It is like signing your name to a document, having it witnessed, and never looking back. You are not allowed to tell the world, "Guess what I did? I have actually prayed for my unfaithful spouse to be blessed." No. It is quiet. Only the angels witness it, but it makes God very happy.

After all, every parent wants their children to get along with one another. No parent likes it when one child comes and squeals on the other and demands that they be punished. The poor parent is put on the spot. What gladdens the heart of every parent is when there is love and forgiveness, and the parent is not put on the spot to have to take sides and punish anyone. That is what we do for God when we ask that He bless and not curse. He told us to pray for our enemies, "that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteousness" (Matt. 5:45).