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*40 Treasured
Bible Verses*

A Devotional



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INTRODUCTION



How strange: a book titled *40 Treasured Bible Verses*! The little segmentation of the Bible familiar to us as a “verse” didn’t even exist until the sixteenth century. And how often does the Bible suffer crude misreading because we lop off a verse and make it say whatever we want it to say?

Yet it seems Jesus was utterly familiar with what we’d call verses. In a pinch he would quote from memory an especially poignant sentence from God’s Word, whether he was preaching his first sermon (Luke 4:18–19) or dying on the cross (Mark 15:34). For many years, humble Christians would “memorize” Bible verses, unforgettable treasures that shaped thinking and living, providing solace and a true compass in times of duress.

In this book, I have tried to talk about verses with the context and background in mind. The lunacy of this endeavor was selection. The publisher said, “Let’s do forty.” Seemed easy, until I got busy picking: this one belongs, and we must use that one, and here’s one I didn’t think about at first . . . and it didn’t take me long to zoom well past forty. Perhaps such a quandary is inevitable, given the riches of God’s Word.

So we begin. Read, share, reflect, have a conversation with others. And poke around to find your own favorite Bible verses.

1



JOHN 1:14

The Word became flesh, full of grace and truth.

The Gospel of John begins like the first notes of some grand symphony, or perhaps the first brushstrokes of a masterpiece on canvas, or the first words whispered to you when you were cradled in your mother's arms. "In the beginning was the Word. . . . And the Word became flesh . . . full of grace and truth." Who was Jesus? Was he born to Mary in Bethlehem? Had he always been? John 1 unlocks a mystery. The Word always was God. Somehow, the fellowship that is God, the intimate relationships of love that are God's heart, have always been, and will always be.

The poetic genius of this overture to John's Gospel is astonishing and moving. Even in our day, when words are cheap, strewn meaninglessly all over the place, words matter. John's words are beautiful, for they speak of the one true Beauty. This symphonic ballet of language tries to express the inexpressible. God's inner self, God's loving heart, God's eternal fellowship, spilling over and making a world, knowing full well that the

world would miss the point and would be downright recalcitrant in reply—but Love loves anyhow.

Ask anyone: What was the most beautiful moment in your life? At first, most people recall some spectacular sight they once photographed. But if they linger over the question, they arrive at some truly beautiful moment when words that matter were spoken. “I love you; will you marry me?” “I forgive you.” “I am immensely proud of you.” “I just learned that I am pregnant.” Life is birthed through words.

God created everything effortlessly with a mere word. “Let there be light.” Jesus is the primal utterance of God, the Word behind the words, framed in the heart of God before time, yet not content to be sequestered outside of time. David Bentley Hart has written elegantly of “the scandal of Christianity’s origins, the great offense this new faith gave the gods of antiquity, and everything about it that pagan wisdom could neither comprehend nor abide: a God who . . . apparels himself in common human nature, in the form of a servant; who brings good news to those who suffer and victory to those who are as nothing; who dies like a slave and outcast without resistance; who penetrates to the very depths of hell in pursuit of those he loves; and who persists even after death not as a hero lifted up to Olympian glories, but in the company of peasants, breaking bread with them and offering them the solace of his wounds.”¹

We often think of the Word becoming flesh as an emptying: Christ, “though he was in the form of God, . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:6–7). But this Word isn’t a hollow vessel, an empty shell. The humanity of Jesus *is* full; it is Fullness. The emptying is not an emptying of grace. The Word made flesh *is* grace. The flesh is God’s glory. Jesus was not merely pretending to be human; he really did enter into our flesh of weakness, mortality, pain. There is no other God, no other secret truth about God. Jesus’ suffering was no aberration from the truly glorious nature of God. God’s glorious nature *is* the suffering. The Word made flesh is quite full of grace and truth.

We live in a culture that cares little for truth. Everything is about what works, what sells, what “seems” true. We’ve been lied to enough that we are cynical about the possibility of truth. And yet truth matters. Truth is our best defense against evil. Truth is more than mere facts. The historian David McCullough said, “You can have all the facts imaginable and miss the truth, just as you can have facts missing or some wrong, and reach the larger truth. ‘I hear all the notes, but I hear no music,’ is the old piano teacher’s complaint. There has to be music. The work of history . . . calls for mind and heart.”²

What is this music for mind and heart—this “fullness” of grace and truth? Don’t we innately crave fulfillment? We stuff something inside the gnawing emptiness we feel in our souls: busy-ness, things, alcohol. Is Jesus what fills the hollow place? Yes—but we must be careful not to idolize our own cravings. It is not the case that Jesus satisfies us with what we’ve always wanted. No one desired Jesus. His own people rejected him; he “dwelled” among us, but we did not even recognize him. “He had . . . no comeliness that we should look at him” (Isa. 53:2).

The Word tutors our desires; they are converted into something truer. God has something far richer in store for us than merely what we thought would do. What did I desire five minutes before I thought about Christ? I cannot recall, and I’m not sure I heard the screen door slam behind me as I rushed out to follow him. I did not know what to desire until the one with no comeliness, the one singular Beauty, became flesh and dwelt among us, the wonderfully true Word overflowing with grace.

2



MATTHEW 18:3

Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

We sigh sweetly on hearing Jesus say, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them” (Matt. 19:14). But what could he mean by saying, “Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom”? In 1538, Martin Luther, stressed by his rambunctious household of six children aged four to twelve, puzzled over this: “What was Jesus thinking? This is too much: must we become such idiots?”¹

In Jesus’ day, as in ours, children were thought of as preliminary people, as if marinating, little projects in the making. But Jesus not only welcomes them, but points to them and says adults have unwittingly been plummeting downhill into immaturity for years. Grab your plastic bucket and pail, climb the hill, and become a child if you want to be truly mature, if you want to know God.

Consider Charles Péguy’s words: “You believe that children know nothing, and that parents and grown-up people know something. Well, I tell you it is the contrary. It is the parents,

it is the grown-up people who know nothing. It is the children who know everything, for they know first innocence, which is everything.”² Children are open, they have more questions than answers, they are receptive, their jaws drop in awe rather easily. Children are under no illusions of independence. They do not hide their treasures, and they share their toys. Their calendars are not yet filled, and they are not in a hurry. Children toddle and are rather inept, and require much mercy.

Yet we dare not romanticize childhood—and even some of the more grueling aspects of being around children can teach us about life with God. Children demand a response, and *now*. They brook no rivals for their attention. They aren’t trying to please anybody in particular, and they speak their minds quite boldly. Children may evoke a gentleness, but they are not gentle themselves. Somehow God is like such children, with an impatient, imperious cry of *Now!* And the urgency of that “Now!” may apply flawlessly to a moral rule of thumb Christians and non-Christians can agree upon: the thought of any child suffering, being mistreated, or going hungry is simply intolerable, and so we must do something—now!

I wonder if Jesus, if he lived in our media-crazed culture, would urge us to become like children. We have unwittingly ruined childhood. Fawning over children, we segregate them into groups of other children and insist they engage in “age-appropriate” activities—meaning they are never exposed to adults, to learn how to become adults. Jesus might not mind that failure to learn to be an adult so much. I laugh when I think of what C. S. Lewis said when asked why he penned “children’s literature.”

Critics who treat adult as a term of approval instead of a merely descriptive term, cannot be adult themselves. To be concerned about being grown up, to admire the grown up because it is grown up, to blush at the suspicion of being childish, these things are the marks of childhood and adolescence.⁵

But we have ruined childhood by thinking kids can become grown long before they are ready. Neil Postman wrote of the “disappearance of childhood.”⁴ Once upon a time, there were adult “secrets” which you only learned when you were old enough to handle them. But now there are no secrets at all, and Jesus cannot have meant that we should become like today’s children, who know as much or more than older adults. Jesus surely intended a kind of naiveté in children, an innocence, a beautiful lack of awareness of the tawdry, complex nature of adult life.

Parents think of children as problems to be solved, as projects to be pursued, but children are mysteries to be loved.⁵ God, in the same way, is not a problem I try to solve with my brain, God is not a project I must manage or control; God is a mystery, and I am to love God the way a child loves her mother.

Jesus’ reminder that we are to become like children is lovely, humbling, hopeful. Hans Urs von Balthasar pointed out that “only the Christian religion, which in its essence is communicated by the eternal child of God, keeps alive in its believers the lifelong awareness of their being children, and therefore of having to ask and give thanks for things.”⁶

How on earth can a crusty, haggard, busy adult “become like a child”? You aren’t a victim as much as you think: You can clear your calendar. Spend time with children: watch them, get on the ground and play with them, ask them to show you a treasure, and you show them one too. Share your toys.