

SURVIVING YOUR TWENTIES

**PHILADELPHIA
CHRISTIAN
STUDENT
INITIATIVE**

Surviving Your Twenties

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Thinking about life after college?

Getting out of school soon?

*Staring the heart of your twenties
in their face?*

Are you ready?

Your life is about to get started.

Maybe that's what you thought when you went off to college. But surely, now that your freshman shine has worn off, you've realized that adulthood didn't really come when you were chilling in the dorms with an xbox and Doritos. No offense to the college life, but if you're about to graduate, you probably sense that things are changing, and the "real" part of "real life" is headed your way.

And you're right.

But are you actually prepared for this new phase? Many people aren't. As someone who's lived through the twenties, I can testify that I didn't really see them coming—not for what they were, anyway. And now that I've made it all the way through, I have to admit I'm shocked by all the spiritual carnage that I can see around me. So many friends didn't make it in to their thirties with faith and spiritual life intact. So many don't even say they *believe* any more.

That's what really motivated this booklet. It comes from a desire to see fewer people walk that path. It's meant as a "heads up" for Christians embarking on adulthood—a chance to take a breath and look down the road before you *head* down it.

First, let's look at seven aspects of life that frequently catch Christians off guard in their twenties.

WHAT TO EXPECT: NEW CHALLENGES

Most of us haven't really heard or thought about much of this before, but your twenties really do present a bunch of situations you will need to navigate for the first time.

1. New freedoms.

One of the first things to hit you as you exit college and get into your mid-twenties is an avalanche of freedoms. Especially if you get a job soon after college, all of a sudden you've got money, time, choices, maybe even a new car. Adulthood can feel pretty heady. Right here, at the outset, is where many young Christians start to weaken. When the parents aren't pushing church attendance, and the lack of curfew means that Saturday Night hanging out goes late...church can

seem like an expendable feature. When money lets you buy whatever and go wherever you want...temptations have more direct access to you. Suddenly, the external guards (people and times and places and finances) God had put in place for our childhood are removed, and we have only our own connection with Christ and convictions about God's word to guide us.

Think about your current spiritual state: Right now, if you could go basically anywhere you wanted, with whoever you wanted, and do just about anything you wanted, would you choose holiness and fruitfulness? Would the inner leading of the Holy Spirit guide your actions (Romans 8:14), or would opportunities call you to follow your heart wherever *it* leads (Jeremiah 17:9)? It's an essential question for you to answer, and to answer honestly, because it could be reality for you very soon.

2. Lifestyle pressures.

While new freedom is something we might expect, most people don't see this one coming at all. See, if Christianity was part of our youth, we tend to think we already understand temptation, and maybe even how to fight it. We understand we need to battle sexual temptation, and peer pressure to drink or smoke and things like that. If we're avoiding those things, we might feel like we're resisting temptation.

The problem is that the temptations of our youth are only the beginning. They're still around in your twenties, of course, but now they're joined by a whole new group—the temptations to pursue a certain kind of *life*. If you've been looking around, you've already noticed it's what everyone your age is starting to do. Everyone's getting on the superfast conveyor belt of chasing jobs, success, promotion, wealth, and all the other things people chase.

All kinds of new questions become pressing in our twenties: Who am I going to be? Do I pursue money, and how? What social class will I occupy? Will I be left behind in the rush for success? What kinds of jobs should I pursue? Should I compromise at all to gain

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promotion? These temptations feel pretty different than the temptations we fought when we were younger. They're bigger. They promise more, and they threaten more, too. They act like they'll leave you alone and poor in the dust if you resist.

A good first step in starting to battle them are to search your heart for pride and fear. You will need to examine your pride before the Lord, or temptations to *be somebody* will seem irresistible. And you will need to hash out your fears before him, too—who do you trust to bring you provision, security, and fulfillment?

Finally, a lot of these things boil down to issues of *identity*. A friend in

So much boils down to the issue of identity—Who are you really?

his twenties pointed out, "I've been realizing recently that a lot of my struggles are rooted in identity issues—seeking identity in accomplishments, approval, possessions." This highlights a crucial question to hash out with your God: "*How do I know who I am?*" (See the list of verses at the end of the booklet for scripture's answers to this question.)

3. The lure of intellectual respectability.

So many of us spent our school-aged years fighting the coolness of stupidity, where it was not OK to be smart, that we're a little blind-sided when all of a sudden we realize that much of the adult world (at least in certain circles) is driven by a desire to appear intellectually sophisticated. It's like one day we wake up and everyone's reading new things and expounding on their ideas and philosophies. Intelligence is (surprise!) respected. Big words and concepts coming out of your mouth can earn you a hearing and sometimes even success. So far so good, in one sense I guess. Better to be smart than dumb.

But along with this reality comes a couple major temptations. First, there is the subtle and strong pull of pride: Am I considered smart? How can I impress people with what I know and how I talk? Second, there is the pressure to conform our thoughts to cultural patterns of thinking so that we can be considered intellectually respectable. Simply put, if we don't think and talk like everyone else, we face the danger of being considered stupid, or out of touch, or provincial,¹

or maybe even worse.² You could find yourself thinking, “If I hold this view, will I be respected?”

You can probably already see what a problem this is for those of us who are intent on following Christ. Jesus just doesn’t think like our modern adult world. In his day, he was often out-of-style intellectually, and was regularly mocked by the intelligentsia of the day. In fact, he regularly taught his followers they could expect the same kind of reception.³

Before your twenties really start rolling, I recommend you take some time to really sit with Jesus in passages like Mark 8:34-38. Basic to the Christian life, as Jesus describes it, is the understanding that to follow him means we will have to resist the temptation to be ashamed of him (and his words). And few things can cause you to feel that “shame” like people ridiculing you intellectually or writing you off because you try to think and talk like Jesus. A great question to gauge yourself in this area would be: Have I thought through exactly what the Bible means by “the fear of man,” and does that phrase describe my thinking?

*You’ve seen
more, and
know more, of
the world as it
really is.*

4. A new adult awareness of evil.

This one’s a little different than the first three, but it’s real nonetheless. Along with getting through school and starting to look into the job world, in our twenties we’ve begun to see and notice more of the world. We’ve read more now, met and befriended more people, been more places, read more news stories—in short, we already have way more experience than we had when we were in high school.

One of the major things we tend to become aware of is all the pain and suffering in the world: a relative gets sick; tragedy strikes a friend; the news shows killing, wars, and hunger; huge, global systems of economic oppression suddenly come in to view; disaster obliterates whole islands and leaves populations in crisis.

Trying to figure it all can stress and stretch your faith. It could seem to undermine your belief in a good God. This booklet is not the place to tackle the issue, but take this as a heads up: the more of the world you see, the more you'll see evil. And now that your mind is engaging with the world as an adult, your mind will also engage the questions evil throws up in our way.

Maybe the best way strengthen yourself in these area is not to go searching for some easy answers, but, as Peter wrote, to mentally "gird up"⁴ —to get prepared for a life of working through these things with the God who promises to walk through everything with us. In other words, we have new challenges to face, so let's get ready for them and commit to going through them *with* God.

Pain, suffering, and evil present some of life's best opportunities for submitting our minds to the reality and wisdom of God, which is essential for real growth. They also give us true tastes of the mess sin has made of everything. And they turn our hearts towards the promised day when they're completely expelled from our world.

*The twenties
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piling up, come
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5. The accumulation of sins.

When we were young, our sins were small, at least in effect. And, since we hadn't lived that long, we didn't really

have time to commit very many. Because of this seeming smallness in both quality and quantity, we can enter adulthood with some of these parts of our life left un-dealt with. Maybe it's a bad habit, or a character trait not yet brought under control of the Spirit. Maybe it's simply the accumulation of sinful actions, small or big, private or public, that mount up with the passing years. The twenties are when these things often come to a head, and that's when you see someone's life all of a sudden fall apart, seemingly without warning.

With a groan in my gut, I think of how many friends I have who got married in their twenties, but began their thirties single. I think of how many ended high school with lives that seemed to display living faith, but couldn't even confess a belief in God at all before ten more years were up. The issues might be any of the things in this booklet (and probably they're always a little mix of a few of them), but

more often than not, if you look behind a spiritual melt-down you just see a pile of sins.

If that last paragraph started to sound judgmental to you, please remember the purpose of this discussion. If you're reading this, most likely you haven't ended up there yet, and the hope is that you never would. So, without judging anyone, may I suggest that you begin your post-college life by practicing a little Psalm 139:23-24 and 1 John 1:9 with your Lord? God is merciful, and he already knows everything about us anyway. He would much rather have us come to him, confess, allow him to change us, and grow, than to bring discipline on us and have consequences catch up to us.

6. A long, slow neglect of basic spirituality.

One time I was talking with a friend (who was wrapping up his twenties) about all the people he knew who had walked away from Christ before they were thirty. He said these basic and profound words: "You get out of college, and it's like, are you going to read the Bible? Are you going to do your devos? Are you going to go to church? It's time to do these things for yourself. It just seems like lots of people aren't willing to do the little things."

A habit of neglect in the twenties can end up in spiritual starvation.

I've never forgotten that conversation, mostly because what he said was so true. There are basic things we do as Christians which are part of cultivating spiritual life and growth. To say it another way, there are a few things God has appointed as the ways we will be in relation to him.⁵ If you've grown up in the church, let's face it, these are the things you've been hearing about since childhood. Reading your Bible. Spending time in prayer. Being faithful in your connection to your church. It's not that these activities are magical, or necessary for God to give you stars on your paper, but these things are some of the fundamental ways in which we meet with Him, hear His word, commune with him, and receive the ministry of His Spirit.

We need the written word of God, and we need a steady diet of it. We need to stop, slow down, and sit with our Father in prayer to ask

and hear. We need the body of Christ, actual people together in one place, pastors and elders teaching the word, and the working of the Spirit that only happens when we're all together.

If you develop a habit of neglecting those things in your twenties, it can end up in spiritual starvation. It's like trying to run a marathon when you haven't eaten for a week. Temptations will be stronger. The Spirit's voice will be quieter. Christians will feel strange. Wisdom will seem foreign. Living this way, slowly but surely, you can lose track of God, and of yourself. It's happened too many times for you to think you can beat the odds.

The answer is to let the Lord lead you into faithfulness in the regular, small, daily aspects of your Christianity. Sometimes these parts of our spiritual life seem boring, but faithfulness in small things enables our faithfulness in the big moments. Think about it: the only way you can walk with God for all ten years of your twenties is to walk with him for 3650 days, one day at a time.

*Let downs
can lead to
cynicism,
which can
lead to
isolation.*

7. Disappointments and discouragements.

This one is huge—and it seems to be especially good at devouring Christians in their twenties. Sometimes we struggle in our faith because we attached all kinds of other things to our walk with Jesus and assumed they were part of the whole thing. Maybe it's a certain dream we had for life (marriage, maybe, or a kind of job, or a certain level of health). When these things don't materialize, or don't go like we thought they would, our faith can suffer because of how mixed-in to our spiritual life they were. Personal suffering falls in to this category too. We take a financial blow, or sickness or loss or tragedy hits our life, and we can be left wondering, "what's this all about?" Or maybe something negative goes down at our church. We develop cynicism towards our church. Or towards church in general. Sometimes the cynicism spreads to Christianity, and Christians in general. Once disappointments with church set in, a hundred reasons not to go back leap up in our minds.

These things can have the effect of isolating us. They separate us from other Christians, and from church. They separate us from the places and people and activities where God used to meet us. They separate us from prayer and may even calcify into hostility towards God himself.

You can bet on it—reasons to get disappointed and discouraged will come in your twenties. Cynicism will constantly lurk nearby as a potential friend.

Two things can be very helpful here. First, just knowing and expecting this will help you not to be shocked when it comes. It won't feel so alien to the experience of being a Christian. Second, cultivating an openness to the Lord in all your dealings with him will allow him to constantly sift and grow your faith.

Disappointments come because we thought reality would be something other than it is. Discouragement is what sets in when we start to think that disappointments are inevitable and never-ending. The answer for both is to have God adjust our vision, so that we see life and reality more clearly, for what it really is, and therefore we aren't thrown off when reality is...well...reality.

The goal is that our hope doesn't die when hard things happen, because we aren't expecting ultimate, eternal disappointment, but just the opposite. In the end, for the Christian, God wins, and we share in his victory. When this big, future-oriented vision of God shapes your thinking and your outlook, you start letting him interpret the events of your life, and how you should feel and respond in each situation.

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PURSUING A SPIRITUAL LIFE THAT ENDURES

If those are the challenges, what should be our response? May I suggest five things that you might find helpful?

1. Be an adult about your spiritual life.

All these challenges are coming your way for one basic reason: You're not a kid anymore. Maybe your childhood was great, but it's over. And that's OK. In fact, it's good! It's time to live life! But so much of the time people fail in the face of adult challenges because, quite simply, they don't have an adult faith. Maybe they got saved at a youth camp, or had a spiritual rush during a winter weekend, or still have their old *God Adventure* devotional they look to in trying times. But you can't meet adult problems with little-kid faith. The faith of an 8-year-old is exactly what an 8-year-old should have, and is tailored for the challenges an 8-year-old faces. It's the same with the faith of a 16-year old. But lots of us haven't grown too much since those formative youth group years—now we're toting our 16-year-old faith into our twenties, and it just won't be up to snuff.

God deals with us according to *who* and *where* we are. So, for the rest of your life, he's dealing with you as an adult. He's inviting you to find new depth, new strength, new wisdom, and new insights now that you're grown up. He's offering you new opportunities to grow and bear fruit that weren't at all possible when you were a child. It's not that you'll ever lose the "child-like faith" Jesus invites us to have, it's that that faith gets bigger and stronger now that it's the faith of an adult.

Two of the primary traits of adulthood that apply to our spiritual lives are taking initiative and owning responsibility. Just like you'll need to show initiative and responsibility to get and keep a job, or buy a house, or take out a loan, or get married (all adult activities!), there will need to be these same traits in your pursuit of spiritual things. So let's lay aside the passivity and buck-passing that permeates so much of the culture around us, and allow the Spirit to lead us into an active, lifelong pursuit of God.

For instance, there are two areas of maturity your new adult life will require: your relationship with God's word, and your connection to your church. The challenges of life will demand an adult ability to search and understand scripture—to know what it really says

about God, humanity, life, and the future. You need a mature sense of how its teachings explain and assist our lives. You'll also need an adult involvement with the other believers—which means we simply can't afford to relate to our local church like children. We can't afford the kind of church attendance that just shows up to keep someone else happy, or slinks into the back pew late every Sunday, or just checks out a sermon but doesn't develop living connections with people that include serving together, praying together, and being accountable.

If we've been blaming anyone or anything for our lack of growth, we need to go back and reread Romans 8:31-39. Can anything or anyone really get in between you and God? Can anything from outside of you really mess up your spiritual life? When we see that it's only our own sin that can have any negative impact on our walk with Christ, we can be empowered to face our God as the men and women he made us to be.

2. Practice whole-life discipleship.

One of the most common spiritual errors people make is to notice a problem area and then work away at it hoping for change, while neglecting other areas of life. It doesn't work, though, because you simply can't grow with a piece-meal approach. Spiritual growth only takes place in the context of discipleship. Jesus invites us to "take his yoke upon" ourselves, and to follow him.⁶ We're called to be his disciples, and that is, by definition, a *whole-life* activity. So if we want to avoid falling in certain areas, or we want growth in a particular part of life, the only answer is to give our whole lives over to the Lord as yielded up, living sacrifices.⁷ This will especially help you combat the fifth and sixth entry in the list of challenges we just looked at (accumulation of sins and neglect of basic spirituality).

God claims lordship over my whole life. Only by yielding all the way can I really experience what he gives his followers and children. So let's not hold back—let's be those who live lives that "prove what God's will in the world is."⁸ As the Apostle Paul wrote once: "May the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁹

3. Be willing to be different. Be ready to be misunderstood.

This sounds kind of elementary, but we live in a time when it is very dangerous to forget that we were called to a life which will set us apart from those around us who aren't following Christ. Peter himself wrote that we should expect people to think the way we live is just *odd*.¹⁰ Jesus said worse—he said that if people hated him (and they did), we could expect them to hate us.¹¹ As Christians over the last 2000 years have pointed out, this doesn't mean that we should want or like people to oppose us. It just means that we should never be surprised when it does happen as a result of our normal Christian life.

This will come up especially in instances where intellectual respectability is on the line, as discussed earlier. But it will also involve the lifestyle pressures that led off our list of challenges, and a whole host of other things from entertainment choices, to how you spend your time, to the way you show love and mercy to people around you.

It seems like maybe 60 or 70 years ago it was the case that society in general reflected a lot of Christian ethics and virtues. This meant that a normal Christian might not have looked very different, on the surface, from the rest of the populace. But those days are over. In our day, if you seek to live out the teachings of the New Testament, you'll stick out.

4. Trust the word of God above everything else.

A friend who was discussing the first major challenges of her Twenties (lifestyle pressures) once said to me that when it all came to a head, the thought that finally saved her was, "Am I going to believe the word of God or not?" She had the promises of God in front of her, and she simply needed to decide if they were true or false. Was this God to be trusted? Could she, and more importantly, *would* she bank everything, *her whole life*, on whether or not he'd come through? In that moment, she decided she had no reason not to trust God's word.

It's not only those times that we need to make this choice. The Twenties are good at showing us that this is how our whole life is lived—in a moment by moment choice to believe what God says over every other voice. No matter what anything else says, sings, signposts or suggests, Christians take each step in life in *faith*—and specifically, faith in what our God has said. So banish from your life anything

the undermines your trust in God's word, makes light of it or makes it seem unrealistic, and you'll find the strength of faith rising in your heart.

5. Seek first the kingdom.

Jesus said it: Don't worry about what you're going to eat or drink or wear. That's how all the people in the world who don't know God live. After all, you have a Father, in heaven, who knows you need all these things. Instead, pursue the kingdom of God and His righteousness.¹²

These famous words sum up so much that we need to know. And when you combine them with another thought from the Apostle Paul—"See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil"¹³—you start to get a sense for what the Lord calls us to for our twenties.

Make God's aims your aims. Let the thing *he's* doing in the world determine what *you're* doing in it, and how you move through it. You'll start to see your time (your twenties) as a gift from God which you can redeem. In other words, you can see these years invested in God's kingdom in such a way that you don't just "get through" them, or let them slip away, but you invest them so that they bear eternal fruit and bring eternal riches.

OVER AND ABOVE SURVIVING

Eternity.

That's actually what the twenties are for.

Every time in life has unique opportunities to bear specific kinds of eternal fruit, and it seems that God gives the Twenties to us to still have some youth and vitality in our bodies along with (possibly) fewer direct responsibilities (related to jobs, marriages, kids, etc.) than we will have shortly.

All our time is God's—and he gives it as a gift we can invest or waste.

So what will it mean for you to seek the Kingdom of God with your twenties?

May I suggest that you set aside some time, soon, to seek God about exactly this question? The point isn't to expect him to give you an outline or road map of the next ten years. But if you seek him, you will find him, and he'll be faithful to set the arrow of your life in the direction he wants it to go. Take the next step of life, the one in front of you, in faith and obedience. He'll guide you through the next step after that.

When you add up those steps, you'll have a journey.

You'll find that your twenties were full of all the ups and downs of real life, but that they were inhabited by the living God, and that he made them fruitful and meaningful—for eternity.

FURTHER READING IN THE SCRIPTURES

A friend suggested a list of verses to help you think through each challenge listed in this book. I think that's a great idea.

So here you go:

- 1. New Freedoms:** John 8:31-36; Psalm 1; Psalm 119:45; Romans 6:22; Galatians 5:1, 5:13; 1 Peter 2:11-16
- 2. Lifestyle Pressures:** Mark 8:35-38; Romans 15:2-3; 1 Timothy 6:6-12; Psalm 73; Proverbs 8:12-21; Matthew 6:19-34; 1 John 2:15-17; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; James 1:9-11
(Identity: Ephesians 1:3-2:10; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Peter 2:9-10; John 1:12-13; 2 Cor 5:17)
- 3. Intellectual Respectability:** Mark 8:35-38; 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:16; Proverbs 1:1-9, 2:1-11, 3:13-8
- 4. Awareness of evil:** John 11:32-36; Galatians 3:13-14; Revelation 21:1-5; Isaiah 25:1-9, 61:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18, 4:14-5:9
- 5. Accumulating Sins:** Psalm 139, 1 John 1:8-2:2; Romans 6:16-23
- 6. Spirituality Neglect:** Psalm 119; Matthew 7:7-11; James 1:5-8, 1:22-25, 2:18; Hebrews 10:23-25; Matthew 18:19-20
- 7. Disappointments:** Psalm 34:17-19; 1 Peter 1:6-9, 1:13-16; Galatians 6:7-10, James 5:7-11; Hebrews 12:1-15; Proverbs 24:10; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Isaiah 40:28-31; 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

There are too many topics in this booklet to suggest further reading on each one, but here's a few ideas.

If you want to **think through the problem of evil**, **Henri Blocher's book *Evil and the Cross: An Analytical Look at the Problem of Pain*** is short, dense, and very rewarding for the time you'll put in to it.

It's also great to have a copy of **William Lane Craig's *Reasonable Faith*** on your shelf, even if you move through it slowly.

For overall depth of vision and maturity in the Spirit, you can't beat **the works of A.W. Tozer**, especially ***The Pursuit of God*, *The Divine Conquest***, and ***The Knowledge of the Holy***.

You might also want to see the PCSI booklet *Planning Your Time With God* if you'd like help in that area.

And while we're thinking about redeeming our time, google **Jonathan Edwards' sermon "The Preciousness Of Time And The Importance Of Redeeming It"** and give it a read.

If you want to start a conversation directly, speak to the leader of the campus group you're a part of or the person who gave you this booklet, or get in touch with us at info@phillystudent.org.

Notes:

1. How's that for an intellectual-sounding word?
2. Like, in our current cultural climate, you might be considered dangerous.
3. See the scripture references under "Further Reading in the Scriptures" above.
4. He wrote that in 1 Peter 1:13
5. In past generations believers called these things "the means of grace." In other words, these are the things God has ordained to be his channels through which he supplies his grace to us.
6. He says this in Matt 11:29
7. Like Paul says in Romans 12:1
8. Romans 12:2
9. This is 1 Thessalonians 5:23
10. And how we refuse to live. See 1 Peter 4:1-4.
11. John 15:18-19, and notice what John wrote in 1 John 3:13
12. Matthew 6:31-33
13. Ephesians 5:16
14. That said, the early Twenties are a great time to get married and start a family.
That may be exactly what God is calling you too.

PHILADELPHIA CHRISTIAN STUDENT INITIATIVE

Who we are:

The Philadelphia Christian Student Initiative has been formed to equip students on college and university campuses throughout Philadelphia, to cultivate Christian thinking and living in the academic environment, and to spread the gospel. Working with existing campus groups, we aim to help you with free resources, city-wide events, and campus-specific forums for learning and discussing the issues that face Christian students. PCSI is based out of Calvary Chapel of Philadelphia, online at www.ccp Philly.org.

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