



you ask about ...

RELATIONSHIPS



Questions
Teens are
asking

by Tim
Pauls

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For Noah, who seems to start every relationship on the right foot. A second son like you makes me doubly blessed.

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So! You Came Back

This is *You Ask*—Volume 2. Volume 1, *You Ask about Life*, covered all sorts of questions about life, including government, creation, cloning, and more. But there was one thing we didn't talk about much at all—relationships. That's because the good editors at Concordia thought that relationships could take up a whole book by itself. Boy, howdy, they were right! Here it is—a start, anyway.

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Whether you realize it or not, you're in enough different relationships to strangle a full-grown yak. A relationship, after all, is simply a connection between two people, so you've got a bunch of them to worry about: you have a relationship with God, with family, with friends, with enemies, with people of the same sex, and people of the opposite sex. Unless you're living alone on a deserted island, you've got a lot of relationships to think about. You're probably going to have some questions. There are a bunch of them out there.

As I mentioned in the first volume, there are far more answers out there than actual questions. This sounds like a good deal at first, until you realize that most of the answers are actually wrong. A bad answer doesn't help. In fact, it often hurts. You want answers that are true.

This leads me to the big flashing DANGER sign when it comes to discussing relationships: *relationship* comes from the same root word as *relative*. I'm not talking about relatives like Uncle Beauregard or Cousin Quigley. I'm thinking of *relative* when it means "opposite of absolute." I'm a believer in absolute truth. God says some things are right while some are wrong; some are holy while others are sinful. Many people believe truth is relative—that truth changes based upon the situation. For instance:

Absolute truth: "It's wrong to steal."

Relative truth: "It's wrong to steal, unless it's from a big company that would waste it anyway."

Or, as we said in *You Ask about Life*:

Absolute truth: “Abortion is wrong.”

Relative truth: “Abortion is right or wrong, depending on the opinion of the mother.”

Here’s one we get to talk about in this book:

Absolute truth: “Premarital sex is sinful.”

Relative truth: “Premarital sex is okay, as long as you think you’re ready for it.”

See the difference? Absolute truth talks about right and wrong. Relative truth says something may be right or wrong depending on the circumstances. If that’s true, then there really isn’t any such thing as right and wrong.

When it comes to relationships, a lot of people believe everything is relative. You should do what you believe is right for you at that time, in that situation. Forget the “Thou shalts” and “Thou shalt nots” God says, and decide for yourself. It gets scary pretty quick. This book isn’t going to do that.

Instead we’re going to speak about relationships using some tools that God provides: these witnesses either proclaim absolute truth or submit to it. These are the same witnesses that we used in the first book, namely:

Scripture

Common sense

Science

Conscience

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We talked about these in *You Ask about Life* at length, so here's a quick refresher course on the purposes and limitations of each of these witnesses.

scripture

The Bible is God's Word, written by men at His direction. The purpose of God's Word is to tell you about His plan of salvation for you. Because it is God's Word, it is without error and completely trustworthy. It is the final authority of absolute truth, of right and wrong. In His Law, God tells you a lot about all sorts of relationships, so we'll be making a lot of use of Scripture. More importantly, however, the Bible is the source of information about Jesus Christ, God's only-begotten Son who died on the cross to take away your sins.

The Bible has limitations—while God has given His Word to tell us about salvation, people expect the Bible to answer every question they have. Imagine this (incredibly lame) conversation:

Son: Dad, I have a date and I need to borrow the car.

Dad: Why should I loan it to you?

Son: Because I opened my Bible to 2 Kings 9, where Jehu traveled to Jezreel. He didn't walk, but rode in a chariot. Since I'm taking Alice out on a date, I figure this is God's way of saying I shouldn't have to walk either.

Dad: As I recall, a chariot had two wheels. Maybe God is saying you should ride your bike.

Son: But it was pulled by horses, and your car has horsepower.

Dad: And yet Jehu drove that chariot furiously. I don't want you driving my car that way, so you'd better take a hike.

Son: Well, if you look . . .

Dad: No, I mean it. Take a hike. Now!

I did say that it was a lame conversation before you had to read it, but hopefully you get the point. The story of Jehu is not written by God to tell when you can borrow a car. It's a story about God's judgment on evil. Likewise, the Bible doesn't have answers to every question about life you have. (That's a reason why I'm not a fan of the popular, but fading, *WWJD* "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelets and theology. We don't know what Jesus would do a lot of the time.) Sometimes, the Bible says, "You must." Sometimes, it says, "You must not." The rest of the time, it leaves it up to you to make a good choice. If you're out on a date and have to choose between steak and chicken, don't open up your Bible to find out what the Lord wants you to order. You can do either with the Lord's blessing. (By the way, don't order rabbit if you're going out with someone who keeps them for pets. That wasn't my best dating moment.) For more on this, see "common sense" below.

science

Contrary to what some Christians think, or your report card says, science is not your enemy. Science is God's gift for exploring and understanding the incredible universe He has created for us. In other words, the purpose of science is to discover truth about the world around you. Without scientific study, there would be no medicine, air travel, computers, microwaves—all sorts of things we take for granted. I'm a big fan of science; and since we're part of the scientific world, science can tell us some things about ourselves.

For this book, science has two very big limitations. For one thing, since science is the study of creation, it just isn't equipped to study the Creator. Science can't tell you about God, beyond the fact He must exist. Many people today try to use science to prove God doesn't exist, or to say the Bible is wrong. As we discussed for a long time in *You Ask about Life*, this is a misuse of science and a real waste of brainpower.

The other limitation is relationships often involve unscientific and irrational behaviors—like having a crush on someone. Such behaviors are also outside of the realm of science. Note my comments about emotions below. We'll use a little science in this book, but not much.

common sense

God has given you an immensely practical tool in common sense, which means you have the ability to make logical conclusions about the world around you,

to make decisions about things the Bible doesn't talk about. You can decide some things are true and some aren't because some things make sense while others don't. This is a great gift—you can make a far better case to borrow your parents' car with common sense than you can with Scripture. Properly used and disciplined, common sense goes a long way to help you make good decisions and keep you out of trouble. However, common sense has an important limitation—it's part of you, and you're sinful. That means you can convince yourself the sensible choice is the sinful choice, that it's sensible at times to ignore the Bible. Be careful, be sure you always submit your common sense to what Scripture says. Given God's faithfulness and truth, it only makes sense.

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conscience

God has kindly written His law on your heart, so you have a built-in understanding of right and wrong. That's why your conscience bugs you when you do something wrong. This is a blessing, an important gift when dealing with relationships. For instance, if you don't want to tell your parents what you did on a date, it means your conscience is warning you of big trouble. However, your conscience has the same problem as common sense—it's part of you, the sinful you. It's easy enough to keep committing the same sin over and over until it doesn't bother you anymore. That doesn't mean the sin is okay, rather you've managed to grind your conscience down and dull it. It's just like common sense: if your conscience disagrees with

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Scripture, you're the one who's wrong.

Those are the witnesses we'll be using to help us look at relationships. There is one witness we won't be using—emotion. Relationships are full of emotions—sometimes rather intense emotions. A lot of people believe in living by feelings. When you start to look at advice on relationships, you tend to hear a lot of silly slogans like, “you'll know when it feels right,” “if it feels good, do it,” “follow your feelings,” or the famous song lyric, “it can't be wrong when it feels so right.” Blah, blah, blah. One of the worst offenders is the idea love is a *feeling*, so you can stop loving when you stop feeling like loving. We'll get into this more later.

But for now, let me say this: I like emotions, they're part of who God made us to be. However, they're not much help when it comes to right and wrong. In other words, feelings don't tell you what's the right and wrong choice, rather how you feel about the choices. You can be attracted to the sin and angered by the right decision, but that doesn't make the sin right. Instead, it shows how prone to sin you are! Furthermore, emotions change all the time because of sleep, circumstance, energy level, and more. I'm much happier to see my kids come bounding out of their room in the morning when I've slept well than when I'm hanging by a thread and begging the coffee pot to work faster. The kids haven't changed, but my feelings have. While some maintain following emotions are the way to go, they should also remember the many murders committed in a moment of strong feelings. Don't

trust emotions. Use them as clues to how life is going, but don't let them make decisions for you.

I think we're about ready to move on, but here's a final thought before we go. Relationships can be messy, because they usually involve two or more sinful people. Sometimes the right decision is clear, and sometimes it's not so easy. Sometimes the Bible clearly speaks to a matter, and sometimes it doesn't. If I'm guessing at something, I'll be sure to tell you I'm giving my opinion, not binding you to something that God didn't say. Sometimes relationships will have you feeling sky-high, and sometimes they'll leave you in the dirt. But, there is one relationship that's perfectly clear. You are one for whom Christ died on the cross; therefore, no matter what else is true, you can be certain God regards you as one redeemed, and uses all things for your good.

We move on . . .

Pastor Tim Pauls



Keeping all of this in mind, let's answer a few questions about you.

How do I know God loves me personally?

Because He says so! One of my favorite parts of the Christmas story is when the angel appears to the shepherds in the field and says, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). Not, "For all the world," which is true, but "unto you." The Lord sends an angel to tell



lowly shepherds the Savior is born for them! Likewise, He says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” In Holy Baptism, the Lord of all specifically targets you with His favor and grace. Likewise, in Absolution, He doesn’t say through the pastor, “I forgive all the repentant people.” He says, “I forgive you.”

I just don’t like myself very much. What do I do?

46 That’s a pretty open-ended question, but I’m willing to bet that most teenagers feel this way a lot of the time. Like it or not, you’re in a decade-long struggle to figure out who you are. For one thing, it’s tough to know who you are when you’re changing physically—when you can’t even trust your body to be the same tomorrow. You’re probably worried about what others think about you since you see yourself as a mess. So along with what we said before, remember you are often your own worst critic. You see all your mistakes, while everybody else only sees a few. You get to deal with all the confusion in your mind; they don’t.

That’s pretty much how I felt when I was starting high school. It wasn’t especially fun. Normal, sure, but not fun. So what do you do? Remember you are the Lord’s own child. No matter how *you* feel about *you*, *He* loves you enough to have died for you already. Remember you’re in a turbulent few years that will even out. When you do something klutzy or wrong, use it as an antidote against pride. You will have a

much easier life if you understand your sins and limitations rather than cruising through high school believing you're invincible.

Remember, invincible high schoolers often get "un-invincibilized" in the real world later. Meanwhile you've gotten over it. Imagine the jock who cut classes in high school and suddenly finds he's not all that talented in college athletics, while others are pulling high grades and preparing for a well-paying job.

In the meantime, stay faithful to the Word and keep going to Church, where your Savior works through His Word and Sacraments to strengthen your faith. The Son of God conquered death for you. Born to Mary and fully human, He endured puberty—without sin—and survived. You're going to be okay.

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Why did God give me a disability?

In this world, life is going to be a struggle for everyone since sin tries to ruin everything. In some cases, this means a disability—like a birth defect or a later injury. Disabilities can afflict your body or your mind. It's safe to say disabilities are going to make success in this world tougher. Like you need me to tell you this!

I can't tell you why the Lord allowed you to be disabled—no one can—the Lord doesn't reveal such secrets in this life. If you spend your life trying to find what God doesn't say, there's a big possibility you're going to miss what He does tell you. Take, for

instance, St. Paul in 2 Corinthians:

So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

(2 Corinthians 12:7-9)

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St. Paul had a thorn. We don't know what it was, but it was something that held him back, got in his way, and frustrated him. He pleaded with the Lord to get rid of it, but God didn't for a reason; as long as Paul had this thorn, it constantly reminded him he should trust Jesus, not himself. If Paul trusted Paul, Paul was a goner. If Paul trusted Jesus, he had eternal life. That's why he went on to say, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). If our weaknesses lead us to trust in Jesus, this is a great strength indeed.

Here's the peculiar blessing that comes with disabilities and other shortcomings. They teach you, in a way far more effective than a sermon, that you can't rely on yourself. They teach you that you need a

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Savior, and your Savior has promised to restore you fully for eternity. Be warned: the devil will use things like disabilities to convince you God especially hates you, but it's not so. You have God's Word of His love for you, He's redeemed you with His own Son's blood, and He will raise you from the dead, fully healed, on the Last Day.

If God loves me, how come I stink at math?

Read the question above about disabilities. It may be you're just not doing the work, but it may be you're just not gifted with numbers. While bombing geometry isn't nearly as serious as a permanent disability, it still demonstrates the fact you have limitations. You have weaknesses. You have shortcomings. In a sinful world, you're not going to be good at everything. Here's something important to think about, something that will affect your outlook for years to come. When you run into a brick wall because of your shortcomings, you can grow bitter about it, believing God let you down. Or, you can use it to remind you that you need Jesus as your Savior, and then go and figure out what talents the Lord *has* given you. I recommend the second.

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I'm thinking of getting a tattoo. What does the Bible say?

Tattoos are big these days, especially with all those

people clamoring to have “I Love Martin Luther” inscribed on their bodies.

The Bible mentions tattoos in Leviticus 19:28, where they are strictly forbidden. However, while God gave this command to His people in the Old Testament, He doesn’t renew it in the New. Therefore, though this may alarm your mom, I can’t say that the Bible forbids you from getting a tattoo. Keep in mind, though, as far as religion goes, tattoos are associated with pagan religions—not Christianity. As I recall, pagan worshipers would sometimes have a tattoo of their favorite god’s name, signifying whom they were dedicated to serve. Even today, you have to prize something pretty highly before you pay to have it permanently inscribed on your skin. On the other hand, Christians received the invisible mark of Holy Baptism, signifying who had chosen them.

Here’s one law that certainly does apply:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.

(Ephesians 6:1–3)

Even though the Bible is quiet on this issue, your parents probably have some good reasons why you shouldn’t go for the tattoo. Consider some reasons from science and common sense.

Your skin is designed by God to keep lots of bad things out and keep you healthy. Tattooing involves

injecting dyes, some containing metals, into your skin. Experts aren't sure this is a real good thing to be doing. Furthermore, the tattooing process can also bring about bacterial infection, hepatitis, and other nasty diseases. Excessive tattooing is considered a form of self-mutilation, indicating a desire to punish oneself and the need for some serious counseling (see the question on cutting below).

We should look at the science of economics, also. Tattoos are expensive, with reputable artists charging well over \$100 an hour. That's cheap—compared to the cost of having a tattoo removed, which brings us to the common sense argument against tattooing.

Common sense says this: get some old family albums out and look at the pictures of you. You're likely going to find your parents dressed you in some outfits you wouldn't be caught in dead today. Now, imagine that you're still wearing one of those outfits, complete with the picture of the dancing pink bunny rabbits and the words, "I want my mommy now!" Mortifying! Now imagine you have to pay a few thousand dollars and suffer immense pain before you can change into another outfit.

I'm betting you've gotten some clothes in the last two years that you've vowed you'll never wear again. Tattoos are pretty much a permanent deal, and what looks cool today is going to look faded and stretched in a few years' time. Do you really, really want to do this to yourself?

What about body-piercing?

If you're going for body-piercing, I recommend a variety of ring sizes so that you can play them like a xylophone.

Seriously, ear-piercing has been around at least since Jacob and Esau (Genesis 35:4), and earrings can enhance beauty. But somewhere between two and ten, the number of piercings in an ear gets to be too much. How come? Some people will say it's just a matter of personal taste, but let me ask you this: Why would you want to get pierced?

Piercings often send a message. As I said before, one or two in the ears often enhances beauty, while some piercings are intended purely for shock value. Like a bunch of steel hoops in your ear with a chain running to your nose. Others convey sexual messages. While others, like excessive tattooing, are considered to be a form of self-mutilation. Indeed, I've run into a few testimonials from people who get pierced to experience the pain of running a needle through body parts. This isn't beauty enhancement, but an indication that self-destruction could be in the works.

In my opinion, the "why" of a piercing is more important than the "where" or the "how many." If you know who you are and you're comfortable with that, those questions won't even need to be asked.

Tongue-cleaving?

Yuck. Tongue cleaving is a step beyond excessive piercing: it's the splitting of one's tongue partway

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down the middle to make it forked like a snake. Highly disturbing, if you ask me! Clearly a form of self-mutilation. In fact, though I'm not a psychologist, I would say this is a big warning sign.

Since you keep talking about self-mutilation, would you like to add anything about cutting?

Cutting is an activity on the rise, particularly among adolescent girls and some guys. In this situation, the individual takes a knife or razor and cuts her skin in order to bleed. "Cutters" are seldom suicidal; they seek to injure, not kill, themselves. The urge to cut is often brought on by serious stress, like anger or even a high academic workload. Cutters appear to feel the stress drains from their bodies along with the blood.

Obviously, cutting and bleeding has its share of physical dangers; however, it is only a symptom of a greater psychological problem. I don't want to delve into that very deeply here, because this is where you need a professional for help. Briefly, though, self-mutilation of all sorts indicates a deep unhappiness with who you are—be it looks, size, ability to cope with stress, whatever. In my opinion, today's youth are thrown into a cauldron of pressure that's only getting worse. Christians suffer these same troubles. Always, always, remember who you are—whose you are—and the worth you have in God's eyes: He has given His only Son to redeem you. You are His treasure.