

BOOKS FOR LIFE

Author and speaker SHARON JAMES reflects on the most significant books she has read over the last forty years



Dr. Sharon James recently completed her Ph.D. at Spurgeon's College, London, UK, on evangelical responses to changing legislation on the family since the 1960s. She is presently a spokesperson for the Coalition for Marriage, a group lobbying the British government to keep the present definition of marriage. Sharon has authored numerous biographies, books on biblical womanhood and devotional bible studies. She is married to Bill, who is pastor of Emmanuel Evangelical Church, Leamington Spa, UK, and they have two children, Peter and Lydia.

I recently celebrated my fortieth “birthday” as a Christian, and took the opportunity to reflect on those books, other than the Bible, which have been most significant to me over the years. I could list many which have had a powerful impact on me, but here are the “top ten”—those I have returned to and read more than once—in some cases many more times.

1. TREASURES OF THE SNOW BY PATRICIA ST JOHN

(1950) Numerous reprints and translations

Patricia St. John was an extraordinarily godly woman. Much of her life was spent as a missionary in Moslem North Africa. When she retired to the UK, she lived in humble social housing in Coventry, placed a snooker table in her garage, and regularly invited in the young people in her housing estate so that she could befriend and witness to them. She was also a wonderful writer, best known for a series of children's books.

I was given *Treasures of the Snow* as a Sunday School prize when I was about seven, and still have that copy, beautifully illustrated by the great Christian artist Lewis Lupton. A poignant, very human story, set in Switzerland, it has been instrumental in the conversion of many children and has been translated into numerous languages. Patricia St. John served as a nurse during the Second World War, and recalled:

as the atrocities came to light there was much anger and hatred. I remembered the resentment of those who could not forgive others and the remorse of those who could not forgive themselves.

So she wrote this book, about children and for children, but with a powerful lesson about forgiveness for all ages. The main character in the book is a girl called Annette, whose little brother is terribly injured because of the cruelty and stupidity

of a neighbour called Lucien. She is consumed by bitterness and resentment. As the story unfolds, she finds that the love of Christ pushes out hatred and unforgiveness, and she discovers that the love of Christ pushes out fear as well. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). I have read this book more times than I can recall, and recommended it to many.

2. THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS BY JOHN BUNYAN

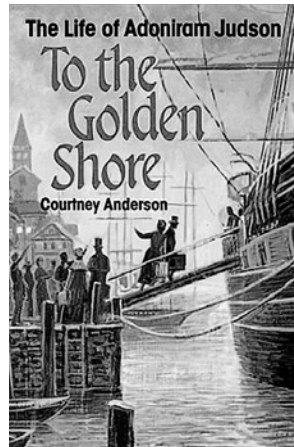
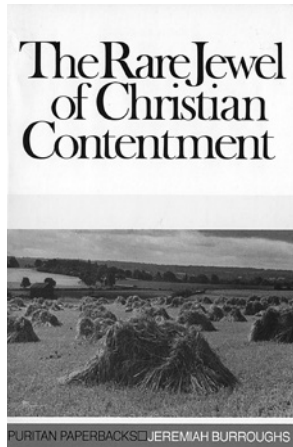
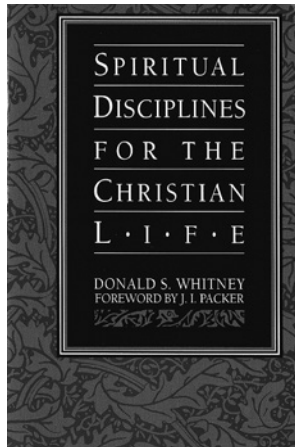
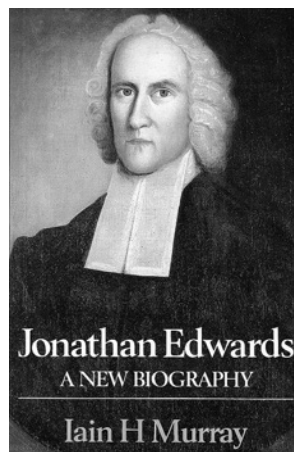
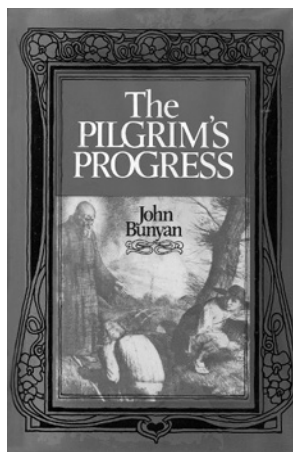
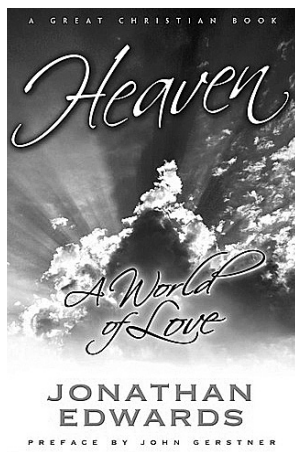
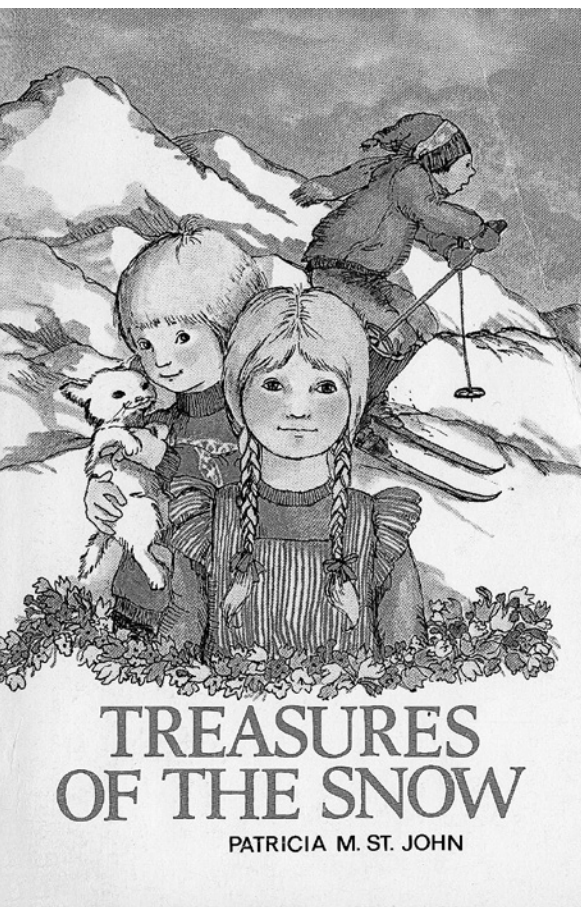
(1678) Numerous reprints and translations

Again, I treasure the copy of this classic given to me as a Sunday School prize at about the age of eleven. I was given the full and unabridged version, wonderfully illustrated with engravings by R.H. Brock, and have read it time and time again. As a young teenager, the images of the Slough of Despond, the Wicket Gate, the burden falling off at the Cross, the release from the Castle of Despair by means of the key of promise, the crossing of the final river—all these made spiritual realities as certain and tangible as getting up and eating breakfast. I have read this numerous times; little wonder that some reckon it to be the second most read book in history next to the Bible.

3. HEAVEN: A WORLD OF LOVE BY JONATHAN EDWARDS

(Preached in 1738, first published 1851, Banner of Truth reprint 1970; an extract from *Charity and Its Fruits*, which is now freely available online)

When I was eleven, I attended the first Carey Family Conference in England and was powerfully convicted by Wayne Mack preaching on heaven and hell. I bought the Banner of Truth booklet, *Heaven: A World of Love*, from the booktable for the grand price of thirteen pence (CAN 25 cents). It is the final chapter of Edwards' exposition of 1 Corinthians 13, *Charity and Its Fruits*. I was enthralled by the sheer beauty of Edwards' depiction of heaven, and, more than that, of Edwards' portrayal of the beauty of God. I have returned to this



chapter countless times over the years, and still treasure my copy of the 1970 reprint. Here is an early paragraph:

God, considered with respect to his essence, is everywhere. But heaven is his dwelling-place above all other places in the universe. All those places in which he was said to dwell of old, were but types of this. Heaven is a part of creation that God has built to be the place of his glorious presence. It is his abode for ever. Here will he gloriously manifest himself to all eternity. And this renders heaven a world of love. God is the fountain of love, as the sun is the fountain of light. And therefore the glorious presence of God in heaven, fills heaven with love, as the sun, placed in the midst of the visible heavens in a clear day, fills the world with light. The apostle tells us that "God is love"; and therefore, seeing he is an infinite being, it follows that he is an infinite fountain of love. Seeing he is an all-sufficient being, it follows that he is a full and overflowing, and inexhaustible fountain of love. And in that he is an unchangeable and eternal being, he is an unchangeable and eternal fountain of love.

4. THE RARE JEWEL OF CHRISTIAN CONTENTMENT

BY JEREMIAH BURROUGHS

(1651, Banner of Truth reprint 1964)

I love this book. I was especially challenged by the central message of contentment while working as a volunteer for two years in Malawi during the early 1980s. On returning to the UK, I set about simplifying and abridging it for my own benefit (ultimately this was used by Grace Publications under the title, *Learning to be Happy*, and translated into a number of different languages). This is a book I have returned to over the years, because the sinfulness of the human heart means that we never finally "get" contentment—new temptations spring up, and we need continually to return to Christ as our source of all joy. The section on "The Evil of Grumbling" is especially challenging. As with many of the Puritans, Burroughs gets straight to the heart—they were called the physicians of the soul for very good reason.

5. SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

BY DONALD S. WHITNEY

NavPress (1991)

This is a book not just to read once, but to study (there is a study guide) and to revisit.

I have used this myself, studied it with others, and recommended it to many. Donald Whitney also has a website with helpful materials on topics related to the spiritual disciplines: biblicalspirituality.org. Whitney writes:

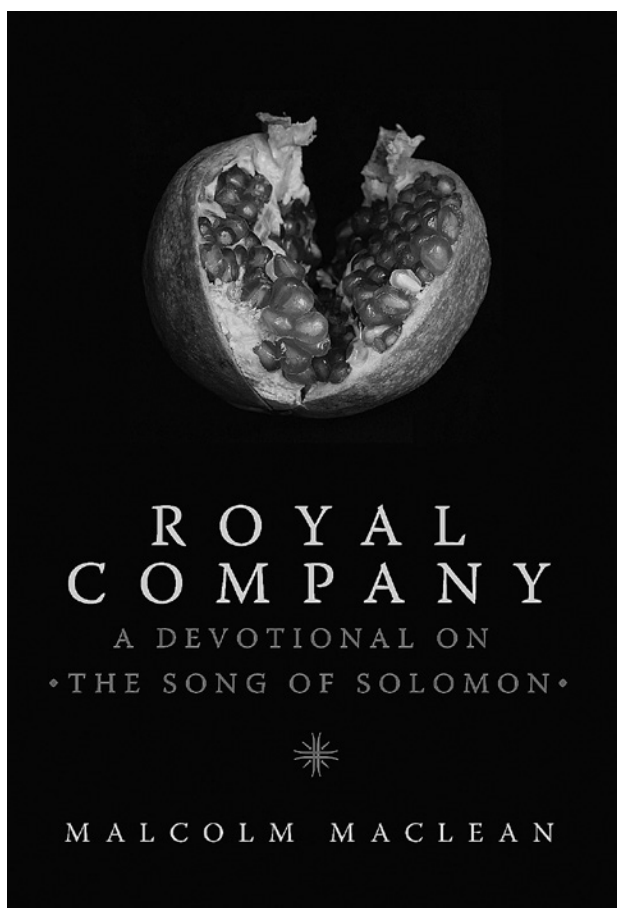
The great British Baptist preacher... Charles Spurgeon stressed the importance [of the disciplines] this way: "I must take care above all that I cultivate communion with Christ, for though that can never be the basis of my peace—mark that—yet it will be the channel of it." The channels of peace and all that Christ gives that lead us to holiness are the Spiritual Disciplines (pages 17–18).

6. TO THE GOLDEN SHORE: THE LIFE OF ADONIRAM JUDSON

BY COURTNEY ANDERSON

Judson Press (1987)

This is a full-length biography of Adoniram Judson, the American missionary to Burma. I have read it several times. Every time, I am awe-struck and moved by the power of the story and by the magnificent writing. Sadly, the author really dislikes the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. This doesn't detract from the testimony of the



central amazing character (and his three incredibly godly and gifted wives).

7. JONATHAN EDWARDS: A NEW BIOGRAPHY

BY IAIN H. MURRAY

Banner of Truth (1987)

8. JONATHAN EDWARDS: A LIFE

BY GEORGE M. MARSDEN

Yale University Press (2003)

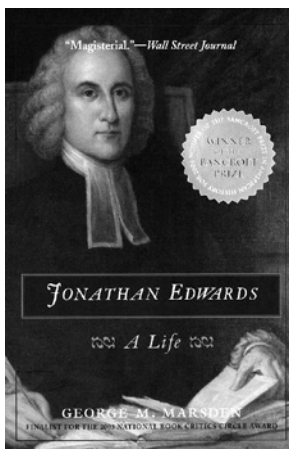
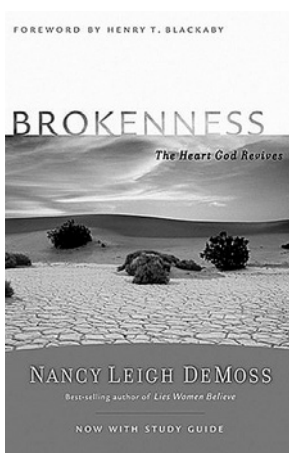
For many years Iain Murray's biography of Jonathan Edwards was one of my favourite biographies. I returned to it often for a powerful account of God's work in revival. But George Marsden's 2003 biography is unrivalled for the way in which Edward's life and ministry is placed in historical context. I have read it more than once, and will no doubt return to it again. Jonathan Edwards is one of the theologians who most rigorously explored the beauty of the Triune God, and Marsden powerfully depicts the development of Edward's own spiritual experience.

9. BROKENNESS: THE HEART THAT GOD REVIVES

BY NANCY LEIGH DE MOSS

NavPress (2002)

I have listened to the recording of Nancy Leigh de Moss delivering the address on which this book was based more times



than I care to count. Her challenge: "Are you a proud or a broken person?" goes directly to the centre of selfishness and sin, and she brings in numerous biblical examples to illustrate the truth that God delights in a broken and a contrite heart. This is another book which I have read and re-read, given away and recommended.

10. ROYAL COMPANY: A DEVOTIONAL ON THE SONG OF SOLOMON

BY MALCOLM MACLEAN

Christian Focus (2012)

This book was published just this year, but I've already read it through twice, and will return to it again. It is a wonderful devotional commentary on the Song of Songs. More or less, throughout church history, the Song has been interpreted as a picture of the love of God for his people, or Christ for his church. Only in the individualistic human-centred twentieth century did some evangelicals buy into the thinking that our own human happiness is centre-stage in God's purposes, and limit understanding of the Song to a purely human love song. This commentary is a glorious depiction of the love of Christ, and strong spiritual medicine.

+ 5 daily helps

Here are the books which, for many years, I've used most days alongside my Bible:

1. PRAISE: PSALMS, HYMNS AND SONGS FOR CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Praise Trust (2000)

I love to begin each day by singing a Psalm. This contains beautiful renditions of every one of the Psalms, as well as a comprehensive selection of traditional and contemporary hymns and songs.

2. OPERATION WORLD EDITED BY JASON MANDRYK

Biblica Publishing (2010)

This is an indispensable guide to praying for world mission. There is a country for each day of the year, with up-to-date prayer points. Referring to this every day helps to keep a global perspective on the petition "Your Kingdom come."

3. THE VALLEY OF VISION: A COLLECTION OF PURITAN PRAYERS AND DEVOTIONS EDITED BY ARTHUR BENNETT

Banner of Truth (1975)

Wonderful God-centred prayers, which help lift my own often selfish and feeble prayers up to a higher level.

4. THE POWER OF A PRAYING WIFE & 5. THE POWER OF A PRAYING MOTHER

BY STORMIE OMARTIAN

Harvest House (1997; 1995)

Of course I pray each day for my husband and children, but general prayers, or narrow "please help with the concerns of today" prayers aren't enough. I have worked through these books daily, many times, as a way of ensuring that I pray longer-term strategic, specific and Scripture-focused prayers for my family. **B**