

Forgotten Blessings

The need to give God thanks for what we have

Introduction

Purpose

In an age when everyone thinks that the world owes them a living and people harp on about their rights, Christians today should consider how blessed they are to live today. In fact, they will be judged more severely since they have many more advantages than people living in earlier times. I will endeavour to point out some of these blessings.

Earlier ages

Saints in many eras before today lived with far fewer advantages than modern Christians; this is true both of the comforts and technological developments of the modern world but also of issues regarding religion. Consequently, these believers will be judged less severely than we today; they will be rewarded for maintaining their faith in God despite being hampered in many ways.

This means that we should be all the more zealous to serve God thankfully and keep a good testimony since we have many more advantages as a result of the time we live in. This should be considered carefully.

Secular advantages

Technological inventions

Where do I begin? We live in a period that is the culmination of thousands of years of human development; the height of technological civilisation. Humans today can do things that would have been considered impossible, or the stuff of dreams, even a few hundred years ago. To be able to speak to, and see, a person thousands of miles away via Skype could hardly be imagined in history. To be able to travel 12,000 miles within 24-hours by aeroplane would have been unthinkable.

It was only just over a hundred years ago that it was said that cities like London could not grow any further because they would sink under a mountain of horse droppings. The Benz¹ internal combustion engine changed all that almost overnight in 1885. Within forty years man was not only 'driving Miss Daisy'² in a motor car but was beginning to use the skies for travel.³

¹ Benz, Karl Friedrich (1844–1929) German engineer and motor manufacturer who was one of the pioneers of the motor car. In 1883 he formed a company to develop the internal-combustion engine, and in 1885 he built the first vehicle to be driven by such an engine. Benz's company was merged with Daimler in 1926.

² A movie of that title.

³ Wright, Orville (1871–1948) US aviation pioneer, who with his brother Wilbur (1867–1912) made the first powered aircraft flight. They made their first sustained, powered human flight, lasting 12 seconds, in 1903 at

By the early 1940s rocket powered missiles were in use followed by jet-powered aircraft, which in turn led to supersonic flight.⁴ Twenty years later Concorde was flying from London to New York in three hours and twenty minutes, cruising at Mach 2.2.⁵

The list of gadgets available to modern man to make his life easier is endless and it would be pointless trying to make such a list. Just think how hard life would be for you without a telephone, a washing machine, a tumble dryer, a car, a cooker, central heating, a fridge and so on. People today do not know that they are born.

What life was like for most

Even a hundred years ago life was very hard unless you were rich and had servants. Houses were small with poor sanitation. No one had a bathroom or an indoor toilet. Heating only came from lighting fires, which was an arduous task. People wore clothes for days and rarely had a bath. In cold rural areas children were sewed into their clothes and covered in goose-fat the whole winter.

Most people worked six days a week for little money. Many children began working before they were 12 and few had a decent education. The fortunate got jobs in service in a rich person's house, but still worked ridiculous hours. The less fortunate spent 12-hours a day down a mine or in some dark factory. One highly paid Victorian job was the night-soil remover; his task was to remove the human excrement from houses by hand and carry it in a cart to a tip.

Very few people had any form of running water; usually it was a hand pump some distance from the house, shared by many. Food was simple and boring, needing much preparation. Most people usually had some sort of stew. Meat was expensive and fruit rarely seen in poor urban areas. Spices were extremely expensive and the province of the rich alone, apart from locally produced items like pepper, cloves or mustard.

In the cities, couples had many children because more than half would die in infancy. My father was born into a two-up two-down terraced house that was a home to nine children. Commonly several children would lie top 'n tailed in one bed.

For most people transport did not exist; the rich had horse-drawn carriages. Railways did not appear until 1825 and a national network took a hundred years to develop.⁶ My maternal grandfather walked 32 miles whenever he wanted to see my grandmother for a few hours when she was in service. Vacations for anyone less than wealthy did not exist. Most holidays were just that, 'Holy days' in the church calendar where folk enjoyed the local fair, customs and market.

Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, USA. Their first practical aeroplane was the Flyer III (1905), which could stay airborne for over half an hour.

⁴ The flight of an aircraft or missile at speeds greater than that of sound (Mach 1). The first aeroplane to achieve supersonic flight was a US rocket-engined Bell X-1, on 14 October 1947. Nearly all supersonic aircraft are military; the only exception being the defunct supersonic airliner Concorde.

⁵ A Boeing 747 takes over seven hours.

⁶ The steam-engine developed in the early 18th century; Richard Trevithick was the first to build a steam locomotive to run on wagon-ways in 1804. Early locomotives were handicapped by the weakness of the available railway track: it was not until technical advances were made in track construction that the railway became practical. The Stockton and Darlington Railway (1825) was the first to carry both freight and passengers. In 1830 it was followed by the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, the line that heralded the beginning of the railway era using Stephenson's *Rocket* as locomotive.

For the poor there was no doctor and no hospital services, unless you were fortunate enough to have a charitable hospice nearby that provided a rudimentary service. Dentists were virtually unavailable. Thus simple ailments and accidents could easily render a person a cripple for life or kill them. Many died of sepsis from simple cuts. Inoculations did not exist so a gardening accident could result in tetanus poisoning (lockjaw) or rabies.

Many poor people were riddled with vermin, such as worms, mites, ticks and lice, with the diseases than emanate from such. The poor were constantly fighting off illnesses, coughing frequently or worse. Those living in big cities were also subjected to thick smog for most of the year; lung disease was commonplace. Living with cockroaches, rats and mice was the norm for many people.

If you had no job you ended up in a workhouse where life was extremely arduous and regimented. Many simply died there, being worn out. If you did get a job, life was a constant struggle to pay the rent and household bills. Little was left over and luxuries unknown to the low-paid. The concept of owning your own house was simply a pipe-dream for working-class people, as was having any sort of free time.

Having said all of this (and we could say much more) people were generally more polite, more sociable, more religious, more law-abiding, more friendly, more helpful, more caring, more considerate for others, more respectful, and more dependable.

So, before we look at more important matters, Christians today should give thanks that they live in a time of technological fulness that makes their life much easier than in previous history.

Religious blessings

Thank God for the Bible

Christians take this for granted everyday; yet to have the readily available record of God's thoughts for man is a gift beyond description.

Secular philosophers spend lifetimes trying to unfathom the mysteries of the universe and the divinity, yet Christians have all that they need to know at arm's length.

This was not the case for OT saints who had little or no Scripture at all. For most of Biblical Israel's history only a few people had access to the scrolls that represented the law. Indeed, for a period even the law was missing until rolls of it were discovered in the temple during a refurbishment under King Josiah (2 Chron 34:14).

Until late in Israel's history, when the scrolls of the OT would have been kept by scribes in libraries, virtually no one would have access to the multiple scrolls that made up the whole OT. A very few people would possibly have access to a few scrolls containing a few psalms or a prophetic word and parts of the law. In those days transmission of Scripture was mostly oral, delivered by priests to the people (that's when things were going well).

Thus the ordinary believer would have no Scripture, apart from a few expensive fragments on vellum (if he were wealthy enough).

In the days of the NT things were not much different. The OT would require multiple scrolls of expensive vellum which no one would have access to. Synagogues would have had copies, which were read to Jews every Sabbath.

As the apostles began writing the NT, papyrus became available for cheaper copies of literary works and letters. Books (codices) were also becoming popular rather than scrolls. Thus copies of the sayings of Jesus and apostolic letters would have circulated, again mostly among the wealthy. Even so, it was over 300 years before the NT was formally collated and separated from fraudulent pseudigrapha.

The NT was written by 95 AD and gradually accepted as authoritative by the general consensus of the church. This means that many books claiming divine origin were rejected; also there was some debate for many years over the authenticity of a few apostolic letters. The Gospels, Acts and Paul's letters were always widely accepted and the early fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, and the Didache) confirm this. Other books, used as authority by unorthodox sects (such as the Gnostic gospels), prompted the church to actively consider what was authentic.

By the end of the 2nd century there was general acceptance of all the NT books except for some debate about: James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, Hebrews & Revelation. During the 3rd c. the canon was clarified with the Eastern Church coming to the orthodox position before the Western. Eusebius (c. 265-340) tells us that all the books of the NT were generally acknowledged except James, Jude, Peter, 2-3 John, which were still recognised by the majority. The first council to concentrate on scripture was the Council of Laodicea in 363. Athanasius' Easter Letter (367) sets out the canon in detail affirming only the 27 orthodox NT books. The Synod of Carthage confirmed a similar list in 397, rubber-stamping what was accepted in the church. In the West certain disputed NT books were accepted by the time of Jerome and Augustine [354-430] and under their influence. A Roman document of the late 2nd c. called 'The Muratorian Fragment' contained almost all the NT. All of the NT except 2-3 Jn, 2 Pt, Jude and Rev were included in the Peshitta (the Syriac Bible), but even the omitted books were included by 508.⁷

So for over a 1500 years saints had no access to the whole Bible, as we do today. Even for a believer living after 400 AD very few would have had a NT and hardly anyone an OT as well.

It was only with the publication of the Vulgate Bible in 404 AD that wealthy people could have access to a whole Bible in Latin. It was expensive because it had to be copied by hand over hundreds of hours. Of course this meant that English people in medieval times, even if their church had a Vulgate Bible, could not read it.

Before the Middle Ages English people only had access to a few portions of Scripture published in Old English, such as portions of the psalms translated by Alfred the Great and others; that is if they could read.

It was only with the invention of printing by moveable type that Bibles became accessible. The first printed Gutenberg Bible appeared in about 1455.⁸ It would be some time before Bibles became affordable to the common man, and even longer before one was available in English, thanks to William Tyndale.⁹

⁷ The last two paragraphs are taken from one of my Question Cards on 'The Canon'.

⁸ Gutenberg, Johannes (c.1400–68) German printer. He is remembered as the first in the West to print using movable type; he introduced typesetting using a matrix, and was the first to use a press. By c.1455 he had produced what later became known as the Gutenberg Bible, the first book to be printed from movable type and the oldest book still extant in the West. [Oxford Encyclopaedia.]

⁹ Tyndale, William (c.1494–1536) English translator and Protestant martyr. Faced with ecclesiastical opposition to his project for translating the Bible into English, Tyndale went abroad in 1524, never to return.

So relatively cheap Bibles in English were really only available very late in church history, certainly around the late 1500s to mid 1600s. Even in Victorian times people living in rural areas had difficulty finding an affordable Bible. The better off had a large family Bible that children, grandchildren and other relatives may have had access to, but individuals in poor areas still had difficulty getting a personal Bible.

Now what you take for granted, having a cheap Bible, was denied most saints for most of church history. You are indeed, very privileged. Give God thanks.

Thank God for living after the Reformation

If it were not for the Reformation, you would now be living under a despotic (perhaps tyrannical) monarchy,¹⁰ governed by the dictates of the Roman Church and living in an atmosphere of superstitious credulity. Indeed, you would likely be suffering under the cruel infliction of the Inquisition and very unlikely to be able to practice evangelical Christianity openly.

It was the Reformation that led to the establishment of Biblical doctrine as the basis of religion (rather than myths of Romanism and the dictat of the pope). Justification by faith alone, the bedrock of the Gospel, once again became understood by the church and was published far and wide. The Bible became the centre of faith and life rather than superstitions, myths and Romanist errors.

Preaching the Gospel openly became prominent and the essence of the Gospel was understood by all, even down to illiterate, poor farm labourers, as a result of the tireless work of great preachers like Martin Luther.

In essence, the Protestant faith became free of the shackles of man and error so that believers could practice godly religion in liberty in their homes, churches and many countries.

Protestantism also developed the godly work ethic of working hard to serve God, whatever the task, so that Protestant nations prospered and developed organs of democracy, such as the parliamentary system, while Romanist nations remained under a pall of monarchical despotism, or later an atheistic totalitarianism.¹¹ Protestant nations flourished greatly becoming the chief centres of technological development.¹²

As a result of the Reformation, books became commonplace. Although the invention of the printing press preceded the Reformation by a few years, the vast majority of works published were religious, being Bibles, commentaries and tracts. It was the Reformation

to his own country; his translation of the New Testament (c.1525–26) was published in Germany. He then translated the Pentateuch (1530) and Jonah (1531), both of which were printed in Antwerp. Tyndale's translations later formed the basis of the Authorized Version. In 1535 he was arrested in Antwerp on a charge of heresy, and subsequently strangled and burnt at the stake. [Oxford Encyclopaedia.]

¹⁰ The last English king before the Reformation, Henry VIII, was certainly a tyrant. [Henry VIII (1491–1547), reigned 1509–47; the Reformation began in 1517. Henry's efforts to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, which were opposed by the pope, led to England's break with the Roman Catholic Church and indirectly to the establishment of Protestantism.]

¹¹ Under the Stuarts Britain had kings that favoured Romanism that became more and more despotic, culminating in the English Civil War and the beheading of Charles I. Eventually, the Stuart dynasty was replaced by William and Mary, followed by a Bill of Rights affirming the rule of law and Parliamentary democracy.

¹² Most notably England, Germany and America.

that led to the explosion of the printing trade, which continued for centuries. It has only been a hundred years or so that secular works of fiction became predominant.

It was because of the Reformation that ideas assumed great importance. There had always been philosophers, though fewer in numbers before the Reformation, but after 1517 there was a flood of ideas, as if man had been set free to think for himself without constraints and threats. As Protestantism is chiefly about liberty, and especially the liberty of personal religion, so people became free to consider all sorts of ideas, secular and religious. This led to the explosion of discoveries and inventions, often by Christians.¹³ Thus the age of discovery followed the Reformation, followed by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Age. Without the Reformation, you would still be riding a horse or walking.

Consider the cruel treatment of scientists by the Roman Church. Galileo Galilei [1564–1642] was an Italian astronomer and physicist who was the first to use scientific experimental investigations and the first to use a telescope for astronomical observations, discovering the moons around Jupiter and the phases of Venus. He was forced to recant that the earth moves around the sun in 1632 by Roman priests. Because a scientist contradicted the Roman Church he was locked up and forced, under threat of torture, to recant for having an idea. Freedom of personal expression and liberty to think only came with the Reformation.¹⁴

The greatest gift was the freedom to practice religion without the fear of Roman persecution. Anyone practising the faith contrary to the Roman Church before the Reformation (and afterwards in Catholic countries) were ruthlessly persecuted to the point of genocide. The classic example of this was the crusade against the Cathars¹⁵ and Albigenses¹⁶ in Southern France. Protestantism enabled liberty of religion; thus the fragmentation of belief is not a bad thing but an expression of liberty.¹⁷

Thank God for Biblical resources

We should all be raising our hands in thanksgiving to God for so many useful resources in studying the Bible. No other generation in history has had such a wide range of helpful tools to aid research of God's word.

¹³ Whole books have been written demonstrating that the chief human discoveries were made by Christians, or at least theists.

¹⁴ I admit that, for a time, there were exceptions as a result of the culture that prevailed. Some thinkers were prosecuted by Reformed regimes on the basis of blasphemy and this was totally in accordance with accepted thinking at that time. Michael Servetus in Geneva is the obvious example, although one must remember that Calvin tried to get his sentence reduced and assisted him in his defence; it was the town council that condemned him to death.

¹⁵ Cathars were members of a heretical medieval Christian sect, which supposedly professed a form of Manichaean dualism and sought to achieve great spiritual purity. However, their heresies were exaggerated by their enemies who wrote their history. It seems many called by this name were merely believers practising religion in home churches away from Catholic influences.

¹⁶ Albigenses (or Albigensians) were followers of a form of Cathar 'heresy'; they took their name from the town of Albi in Languedoc in southern France. There and in northern Italy the sect acquired immense popularity. The movement was condemned at the Council of Toulouse in 1119 and by the Third and Fourth Lateran councils in 1179 and 1215, which opposed it not only as heretical but because it threatened the family and the state. St Bernard and St Dominic were its vigorous opponents. Between 1209 and 1228 the wars known as the Albigensian Crusade were mounted, led principally by Simon de Montfort. Terrible massacres and atrocities occurred. By 1229 the heretics were largely crushed and the Treaty of Meaux delivered most of their territory to France. [Oxford Encyclopaedia, in part.]

¹⁷ European Protestantism quickly split into Lutheranism and the Reformed faith (Calvinism); followed within 80 years by Arminianism and then Amyraldism. English Protestantism divided into Anglicanism, Puritanism, Congregationalism, Presbyterianism and the Baptists (sub-divided into Arminian and Calvinistic Baptists).

Linguistic tools

For centuries the best people could do was trust their Bible version and hope for a good church leader that had some grasp of Hebrew and Latin to explain Bible verses. Any chance of the ordinary person getting to grips with the Greek or Hebrew text was out of the question. Even if they could learn the languages, getting Greek or Hebrew texts was impossible before the printing of Erasmus'¹⁸ Greek NT in 1516, and even afterwards only available to rich people or university libraries.

Over 500 years the gathering of Bible, particularly NT, manuscripts became a science and the collected results were frequently published more and more. By the mid 20th-century there was an array of Biblical textual publications that were becoming increasingly available to the layman.

Over the same period other scholars were publishing other aids for Bible students. Concordances on certain Bible books had been available since Puritan times, such as Robert Allen's 'Concordances of the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes' (1612). Alexander Cruden [1699-1770] went almost insane collating his concordance of 1737¹⁹ that led to other, greater works by Robert Young (1879)²⁰ and James Strong (1890);²¹ however, all were based upon the KJV. Until these appeared there were virtually no publicly available means of finding Bible verses for subject matter. Just imagine that through most of church history it was impossible to find a relevant Bible verse apart from using personal memory.

After the English concordance was available as a foundational tool, lexicons began to appear for students, such as Hebrew-English and Greek-English lexicons. More and more of these became available with some still retaining their importance today, such as the Victorian works, Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon²² or the Greek-English lexicon of Thayer.²³

With the publishing of Greek texts and an accompanying lexicon, a layman student could now get to find what actual words were used in the composition of the NT, but he needed to understand the basics of the Greek alphabet and grammar.²⁴ In time even this was overcome with the publishing of an interlinear OT and a NT. This meant that students could see what Greek word was under the translated word. In time analytical lexicons appeared which gave the parsing of words (the syntactical role, such as declension²⁵ of a noun or tense of a verb).

18 Erasmus, Desiderius [born Gerhard Gerhards, c.1469–1536], Dutch humanist and scholar. During his lifetime he was the most famous scholar in Europe and the first to achieve renown through the printed word. He published his own Greek edition of the New Testament in 1516, followed by a Latin translation. However, he opposed the Protestant Reformation and condemned Luther in *De Libero Arbitrio* (1523); which led to Luther's great work, 'The Bondage of the Will'.

¹⁹ In fact he was confined to an asylum in 1738 and 1753.

²⁰ Analytical Concordance to the Holy Bible.

²¹ Exhaustive Concordance to the Bible.

²² 'Hebrew-Aramaic and English Lexicon of the Old Testament' by Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, finished in 1906 and based upon Wilhelm Gesenius 'Lexicon Manuale Hebraicum et Chaldaicum', 1833 as translated into English from Latin and expanded by Edward Robinson, 1833-1854.

²³ 'A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament' (Abridged and Revised Thayer Lexicon) being C. G. Grimm (1861-1868; 1879) and C. L. W. Wilke (1851) 'Clavis Novi Testamenti Translated, Revised, and Enlarged, by Joseph Henry Thayer', 1889.

²⁴ To be fair, with careful use, both Strong's and Young's concordances enabled a student to get a reasonable grip of this also.

²⁵ In the grammar of Latin, Greek, and certain other languages, this is the variation of the form of a noun, pronoun, or adjective, by which its grammatical case, number, and gender are identified.

All of these aids were vital in order to know what the original texts would have meant to the original hearers. Often this was different to what some Bible versions had written.

By the end of the 20th century resources were now becoming even smarter with the advent of computers and Bible software. All sorts of programs are now available that do all the work previously mentioned (and more) at the click of a mouse button. Today Bible students effectively have the abilities of several academic professors available on a single computer program at their beck and call.

Bible commentaries

Over the centuries there have always been Bible commentators; and these published books of their efforts to aid the church. Sometimes these were sermons of Bible expositions that made general points and were heavy on application, but others were more academic and concentrated on exegesis – getting to what the text actually means.

For instance, Martyn Lloyd-Jones' commentaries on Romans, in many volumes, were originally sermons delivered to the Westminster Chapel in London. These can be very useful (not always), but they have limitations for study because they are sermons. Henry Alford's commentary on the Greek New Testament, however, is an academic study of the Greek text to demonstrate what it actually means. Works like this by professionals are invaluable to the serious Bible student.

For centuries Bible students needed to buy or borrow such books in order to help their study, and thus many developed sizeable libraries, filled with commentaries. Of course this was dependent upon the personal financial means of the student and poor students were at a loss to buy such expensive, and often hard, to find, books.

Today the computer has again made huge inroads into making this more democratic. Hordes of commentaries are either available freely on the Internet or are found in certain CD-ROMs that can be purchased quite cheaply. For example, all the commentaries made by John Calvin are available on a CD-ROM for about £12 or so saving you at least £100 and avoiding shelf space for 22 volumes.

Dogmatic theology

As well as analytical study of Bible words, the church needs good Bible teachers to explain theology and give instruction on doctrine. Over time good theologians wrote various sorts of works that summarised their findings.

Firstly, there are the heavy duty, systematics; multi-volume (usually) analyses of all the teachings of the Bible summarised under various loci (subject headings). There are hordes of these but only a couple of dozen are really important. Then there are monographs on points of theology, such as atonement, justification, the church and so on. Again there are huge numbers of these covering every possible doctrine.

The point is that today all these works are readily available. Not only are they available in book form quite cheaply, they are available on-line, on CD-ROMS and on Kindle editions. There has never been a time in history when so many good theological works were available, often freely (on-line), to the Bible student. For centuries working class believers would have had no access to a systematic theology at all, and perhaps only some access to the occasional theological book that was not in Latin or German.

There is really no excuse for saints not to have good dogmatic works in their home to help with their understanding of God's word. There has never been a time when so many resources were available.

Thank God that you live after the reprint revolution

Before the fifties, reprints were rare and expensive. If you wanted to get copies of, say, Thomas Goodwin's works (12 volumes in the Victorian Nichol edition)²⁶ you would need to scour multiple second-hand bookshops until you found copies that would probably be very expensive and possibly in poor condition. This was the situation regarding all old books. Some of us spent years scouring old bookshops and charity shops for Victorian reprints that sometimes fell apart.

All of this changed with modern technological developments, especially after 1950.

Printing books was originally arduous. Before the Monotype system,²⁷ printing required a man typesetting a book letter by letter (of steel type) into steel blocks on a page matrix, which then printed multiples of a single page; then repeating this over and over for every page of the book. Although the quality was superb and cannot be matched, it was time consuming and thus expensive.

Monotype then appeared where single letters were automatically cast and then Linotype, where whole lines of type were manufactured on a machine; these made the process simpler and cheaper, but still expensive. Also binding was complex and expensive, requiring stitching of a number of pages and setting within a cardboard cover which was then bound with linen. Some books were even more expensive, such as those with gold blocking and marbled pages or leather covers.

A significant revolution was the invention of the paperback where pages were glued to the spine. Though less effective, it made books much cheaper and easy to manufacture. Although paperback pamphlets had existed since the 19th century, modern paperback books only took off in the mid-20th century. Penguin paperbacks began in 1935 initiating the reprint revolution. Suddenly copies of literary works were freely available quite cheap and were easily found.

Evangelicals jumped on the bandwagon. In 1957 a charitable trust called 'The Banner of Truth' was launched as a Christian publishing house. It was one of many that appeared after this time. This was devoted to reprinting great evangelical Reformed, and particularly Puritan, books quite cheaply. The excellent series 'Puritan paperbacks' reprinted portions of great Puritan works, or whole tracts and sermons, and were a superb means of introducing believers to good books. By the time of my conversion in the early 70s, I was able to gather shelf-fulls of these found for pennies in charity shops.

After 1940 new processes of printing were becoming available, such as photolithography. What these meant was that existing books could be photographed on to microfilm, or photaset, and then printed via photolithography to produce a book at a fraction of the Monotype price. The quality was not as good (some pages are fainter than others due to time exposure differences in processing) but that was a cheap price to pay in order to have

²⁶ Goodwin's works were originally printed as a five-volume folio edition published after his death in 1679. These were reprinted (with many other Puritan works) by James Nichol of Edinburgh as 12 volumes between 1861-1866. Goodwin was a great English Puritan and leader of the Dissenting Independents who served as chaplain to Oliver Cromwell (1656) and was a member of the Westminster Assembly (1643 onwards).

²⁷ Monotype: The trade name of an automated typesetting system for metal type, invented in the USA by Tolbert Lanston in 1887 and developed during the 1890s by the Lanston Monotype Corporation (USA). Keyboards produced coded paper tape to control casting machines, which cast each letter and space sequentially in type metal from individual matrices (moulds). The system was universally adopted for quality typesetting. These are now defunct and Monotype went into filmsetting. There used to be a small museum of Monotype machinery in Stockwell, London, but I suspect it has now gone.

the book at all. Furthermore, the manufacture of paper was also developing enabling cheaper production costs.

Thus Banner could publish hardback reprints of old Reformed works at a fraction of the original book cost. Furthermore, due to the charitable status and gifts, books were sold at discounted prices anyway. A flood of Reformed theological and devotional works appeared on the market; often a book was made widely available for the first time in hundreds of years.

Banner was not alone; there were scores of new Christian publishers appearing, either as a new publishing house or as a subsidiary (imprint) of a larger existing publishing house. Famous church leaders began sponsoring new publishing ventures, such as Martyn Lloyd-Jones supporting IVP.²⁸ Just one IVP series, Tyndale Bible Commentaries, has provided extremely useful help to Bible students for decades, quite cheaply. The list of current Christian publishing houses is very long.

With the advent of computers and digital software, particularly character recognition software and scanning hardware, the process of reprinting an existing book became even simpler and cheaper. All that is needed today is one copy of an old work and anyone with a computer can publish multiple copies via Amazon quite cheaply.

I cannot list all the useful publishers and works, but I can give some great examples.

The beauty of the technological advances is that hugely important works that have been unavailable for centuries, perhaps because they were in Latin, are now available at a relatively cheap price. Some examples of recent productions of long unavailable works include:

- Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. This was only available in Latin for centuries and there were few copies in the west. This is odd since Turretin had long been lauded as 'the best expounder of the doctrine of the Reformed Church' (Samuel Alexander) and 'a towering figure among the Genevan Reformers' (Leon Morris). The fruit of thirty years of teaching at the Academy of Geneva, this work was originally published in 1679-85. Yet the first publication of this work in English did not appear until 1992. Before this students were directed by Charles Hodge and RL Dabney to read a single manuscript copy available in Princeton University in 8,000 hand-written pages.
- Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*. Bavinck's systematic theology in Dutch was the foundation that most Reformed theologians used for their subsequent dogmatics, such as Louis Berkhof. Yet it was not available in English in the full version until 2003. A summary was published by Baker in 1956, *Our Reasonable Faith*, but this paperback was a fraction of the four-volume hardback. Bavinck continues to be the main standard of modern orthodox dogmatics yet it took 100 years to produce an English version.
- William Perkin's *Works*. The works of this hugely important English Puritan have only been available in second-hand books for decades and are extremely rare and expensive. Summaries of his works have been produced but these only amounted to short quotes from his books. It is only in recent days that his works are now being reprinted in cheaply available hardbacks for the first time in over 100 years. I believe that the latest book is volume two with more to come.
- William Ames' *The Marrow of Theology*. This book was enormously important in history, being a useful summary of dogmatic theology point by point. Ames [1576-1633]

²⁸ 'Inter Varsity Press', the publishing arm of UCCF ('Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship'); it was originally IVF ('Inter Varsity Fellowship') and began in the 1930s.

was an important English Puritan that was quoted in America more often than John Calvin or Martin Luther. His book was used as a basic primer in university divinity courses. Increase Mather²⁹ said that the Marrow was the only book one required other than the Bible to be a sound theologian. After 1968 a new edition was made available by the United Church Press with a Baker edition coming out in 1997 as a cheap paperback.

Now there is no point adding more and more lists; the point is made.

On top of all this we must now add that most good books are actually freely available to be read on-line or are cheaply available in CD-ROM collections.

At no point in church history until the 20th century were so many good books readily available at a cheap price. For centuries working class people had no access to books at all, or perhaps a few tracts; yet the believer today has access to tens of thousands of new and historical books both on paper and on-line.

Thank God that you can hear good preaching and teaching

We have covered the situation regarding reading good books; here we look at hearing sound words.

In the past Christians were mostly limited to whomever their local preacher was, or perhaps the occasional itinerant preacher. If their local teacher was weak they had little opportunity to hear anyone else, especially in the many centuries when travel was time-consuming and complex. Folk in rural areas, such as rural Wales or Scotland, were even more restricted; perhaps this is why God gifted so many good preachers in those countries. It was not uncommon for poor believers, up to 100 years ago, to walk many miles to the Sunday church meeting in all weathers. I have heard stories of whole families walking 12 miles to get to church.

In big cities there was usually more scope. When a famous preacher arrived on the scene, people would often travel across town to hear someone that God was using effectively. Thus Spurgeon, for example, was able to fill the Metropolitan Tabernacle with 5311 people week by week. On one occasion Spurgeon addressed a congregation of 23,654. During his lifetime Spurgeon is said to have preached to ten million people.

However, this was of no service to people living elsewhere or in the countryside.

Today it is very different. Through various aspects of modern technology it is possible to hear a sermon preached in America within hours anywhere in the world on YouTube or some other digital method.

Audiotapes of great preachers recorded decades ago are being made available either on CDs or on-line. CDs and DVDs can be purchased of conferences that would be impossible for you to attend. There are even television channels that are dedicated to Christian teaching (though most of these are suspect).

The great thing is that a relatively obscure, but very good, teacher can distribute his material very cheaply worldwide through a variety of means – websites, emails, books, tracts, YouTube, CDs, DVDs and so on.

²⁹ Increase Mather, father of Cotton Mather, was a very important American Puritan [1639-1723].

There has never been a time like this in history when teaching material was so widely available to the saint.

Thank God that you have rich sources of indexed information

More than any other time in history, you have access to an almost infinitude of information, and especially theological and historical information. This enables you to discover information on a topic almost immediately. Say, for example, you wanted to know the lifespan of Menno Simons,³⁰ a quick look at a biographical dictionary, an encyclopaedia or Google will tell you that he lived from 1496-1561.

Now indexed information, where topics are listed in alphabetical order, are immensely valuable and cover a wide range of subjects. I must have dozens of dictionaries in my study. For example:

- English dictionary: necessary for correct spelling and grammar.
- Bible dictionary: to find information on all Biblical subject matter.
- Greek-English Dictionary and Hebrew-English Dictionary, of which there are many sorts (plain lexicons, expository dictionaries, critical dictionaries, analytical lexicons etc.).
- Biographical dictionaries.
- Historical dictionaries, such as on church history, cults, and so forth.
- Encyclopaedias of all sorts.
- Gazetteers to enable you to find information on countries.
- Dictionaries of quotations.
- Theological dictionary; an A-Z of Bible doctrine.
- Scientific reference dictionary.
- Dictionary of religions.
- Dictionary of mythology.
- Various types of handbook.

The list is endless.

Now these are immensely useful for finding simple information quickly and to save you reading many books to find only a few pertinent facts.

Now some dictionaries did exist in the ancient world but they were few and far between and probably only found in libraries, such as at Alexandria. But there were far fewer than available today, to say nothing of the fact that we can purchase dictionaries very cheaply. For centuries most working class people would have never seen any type of dictionary.

I don't know when the first theological dictionary appeared, but one old one is Buck's.³¹ My copy is the Henderson reprint of 1847 but the first edition appeared in 1802. Even English dictionaries only appeared quite late; the first was Cawdrey's 'Table Alphabetical' published in 1604. This listed about 3000 words with simple definitions. In a period when trade meant that the English language was changing, Cawdrey intended to supply meanings for unfamiliar words.

³⁰ The founder of the Mennonites.

³¹ 'A Theological Dictionary containing definitions of all religious and ecclesiastical terms' by Charles Buck.

Encyclopaedias on general subjects are much older. The first is considered to be (or at least the oldest in existence) is 'Naturalis Historia' by Pliny the Elder (77 AD).³² This covered descriptions of natural history, architecture, medicine, geography and geology. The first early medieval encyclopaedia was the 20-volume 'Etymologiae' of Isidore of Seville, appearing around 630. The most popular encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages was 'De Universo' by Rabanus Maurus (830). However, the modern form of encyclopaedia evolved out of dictionaries in the 17th century.

The availability of multiple types of dictionary is modern, most appearing within the last hundred years. This means that we are very privileged to be able to discover information very easily. Of course, in addition, we now have computers where dictionaries and encyclopaedias can be stored on a hard drive or CD-ROM or found on the Internet where all sorts of dictionaries are available for free on-line.

Never has there been a time in history when so much information has been available so easily – and yet we live in a period of great ignorance, credulity and dumbed-down social strata.

Thank God that you live in a welfare state

For centuries many poor Christians lived incredibly arduous lives of constant struggle. Often being a Christian meant that your opportunities for employment were reduced because your ethics would not allow many types of work; neither would they allow cheating or stealing. As a result many historic believers had very hard lives indeed.

One result of living so hard meant that free time just did not exist. If you work 16 or more hours a day there is little time for anything except sleeping. Finding time to study the Bible (even if you could afford one) was difficult.

Until the creation of the NHS, state pensions and welfare, poor people died young and suffered much. It was common to see multiple children die; Charles Spurgeon's mother had 17 children but 9 died in infancy – and this is less than 200 years ago. Can you imagine burying nine of your children!

Without the NHS the population was at the mercy of all sorts of problems: plague, infections, illnesses, accidents, and so on; many died very young. The NHS has enabled people to live long fruitful lives when in previous history they would have just died; this is especially true for many babies when infant mortality was very high.

With the creation of the welfare state, much castigated by right-wing activists today in biased TV documentaries, a safety net was erected to help those in society that were severely disadvantaged. Previously certain illnesses and conditions meant that you simply died young; today the state will assist you to live a fulfilled life. This is right and proper in any decent society – the strong help the weak, the rich help the poor.

As participants in society, the welfare state has greatly helped Christians as well as non-Christians. When I left college and tried to find a job in the 70s Heath recession (remember candles in shops?) I was unemployed for many months. Without the welfare state my family and myself would have died, especially being 200 miles from the wider family. In time I gained employment (having had to change direction and ditch what I qualified for) and then I spent many years paying in to that same system. As well as looking for jobs,

³² Pliny the Elder was a Roman statesman living in the first century AD.

going to interviews and writing many letters, those months were used to do very important Bible studies that set a foundation for my future life.

Now that is just one small example of how the welfare state can help Christians. Thank God that you have this, whether old or young.

Thank God for modern housing and sanitation

You need to remember that the modern flushing toilet system only appeared after the Industrial Revolution. This was based upon the plumbing S-Trap, invented by Alexander Cumming in 1775, and the inventions of Joseph Bramah who installed water closets that incorporated a float valve in the flush tank, patented in 1778. After this he began making toilets in London. However, it was only in the mid 19th-century, with increasing urbanisation, that toilets were widely used; therefore, cities began constructing large sewer systems.

One famous toilet manufacturer was George Jennings who thrived after 1840. He installed the first paid public toilets in the Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition at Hyde Park in 1851. For a penny customers got a clean toilet seat, a towel, a comb and a shoeshine. Thus the euphemism, 'to spend a penny' was born.

There were water-flushing systems in ancient times. We are familiar with the Roman system of communal toilets seated over running water, but the Indus Valley Civilisation³³ had flushing water toilets in individual homes and a good sewer system. The Minoans³⁴ also had flushing toilets. A primitive system was even found in Orkney dating to the 31st century BC. But toilets in every home are very recent.

Before water closets, toilets were a hut in the garden with excrement being buried by hand or collected at cost. Although flushing toilets appeared in Victorian England, for decades they were usually outside the home, especially for working class people in back-to-back urban houses. People today forget that it was only in my lifetime that indoor toilets and bathrooms became normal. Even in the mid-60s many British people still had to use an outside toilet. I once visited a college friend who moved to Huddersfield in the early 70s. His house only had an outside toilet and he had to build his own sewer under the road. I also had to build a new sewer for my first house in 1978, fortunately only in my back garden.

It is also worth remembering that modern housing is exactly that – modern. Facilities taken for granted by everybody today are recent, such as central heating. This did not become widespread until after 1970. In fact I did not have central heating until about 2003.

Internal running water is a great luxury that was only enjoyed in recent years. The very well off used to have an internal pump in the kitchen alone; most did not. For centuries fetching and carrying water from a spring, pump, well or river, was a daily arduous task for women in all weathers.

Then again well built houses, able to withstand all weather extremes, for working class and poor people is very recent. It is not that long ago that poor people in rural areas still lived in huts of various sorts. Many folk in Wales and Scotland still live in very simple stone

³³ A Bronze Age civilisation (3300-1300 BC) covering Afghanistan and Northern India along the Indus river. It was one of the three main civilisations of the ancient world, with Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

³⁴ Another Bronze Age civilisation based in the Aegean Sea, centred in Crete.

bothys, very small and simple farm cottages.³⁵ I have stayed many times in a Welsh cottage (between the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains) that had no running water and no bathroom. The water from the local well (about 2 miles away) was the sweetest I have ever drunk.

Terrible slum tenements and back-to-back slum homes were still common in my childhood. It was only in the 1960s that these began to be replaced with (socially worse) tower blocks and re-housing programmes.

The improvement in health and better longevity is often attributed to the NHS or to vaccines, but the real source of benefit has been better quality houses and good sanitation systems. The ability to have a warm home, to wash properly and to get rid of waste effectively are the real reasons why public health is so much better than even the 1960s.

Thank God for spare stuff

Through much of history folk had little or no spare stuff. They struggled to have sufficient food for the week and rarely had a surplus. The working class (or the earlier slaves) had no money to purchase items; they struggled to pay for food and clothes. Almost no one had spare time, there was just so much to do with no technological appliances that save time. As for vacations, these just did not exist until very recently.

Today, although I know that it is very tough for young people and for those on genuine benefits, most middle class and working class churchgoers have lots of spare stuff.

They have lots of spare time and get bored quickly if they are not entertained. Thus they go to movies, bingo, clubs, pubs and the theatre, they watch loads of television every night, they read useless newspapers everyday, they relax at the weekends or pursue some hobby like golf. Many go on foreign vacations two or three times a year. I heard of one church leader that went on 14 vacations a year. Some have so much spare time that they can spend hours playing video games.

Many older folk have spare money; some have a lot of spare money. This is not a sin but I would advise you to consider how it is used. In the past having significant savings was only the province of the rich or the aristocracy – and even they often went bankrupt.

Spare things. For much of history poor folk had only one set of clothes, or perhaps a spare shirt. Today many churchgoers have piles of clothes; famously, some women have dozens of shoes and handbags but I trust that these are not saints. Some people have spare cars, sometimes multiple cars. I confess to own many guitars; but they were all purchased for specific tasks and at some points in my life I was too poor to own any, having to borrow to perform.

Most working people have lots of spare food; so much so that up to 40% of what people buy gets thrown away as waste.

Now this is not written for condemnation; I am making the point that you have another great advantage over historic saints.

³⁵ Bothy (also bothie) (in Ireland and Scotland): a small hut or cottage, especially one for housing farm labourers or for use as a mountain refuge. The word arises from Irish and Scottish Gaelic both, bothan.

Thank God that you can meet in freedom

Of great importance in the UK is the fact that we can currently meet together without fear of persecution. This was not always the case; indeed there have been many times in history when saints were imprisoned or killed for gathering together. Even children were killed by drowning for their faith in Christ.

It is also true that this liberty is not universal. There are very many countries where Christians are persecuted in various ways. Some are just castigated and mocked, but others are tortured and killed. This is not just by terrorist organisations like IS or Boko Haram³⁶ but even by the government of supposedly civilised nations. It is a disgrace that western nations have made alliances with other nations that imprison and kill Christians.

There will come a time when Christianity will be persecuted in Britain, and that may not be too far away; evangelicalism is already considered an offensive cult by the EU. However, until that day we should give thanks that we can meet, not only in formal church settings, but in homes, schools and village halls with no fear of oppression.

Worthy of consideration

We have evaluated a number of advantages that the modern believer has over saints that lived in history, even ancient history. Yet this fact must be considered very carefully; despite all these advantages the modern church is plagued with error, aberrations and blasphemy. In a period when maintaining a good testimony should be easier, it is common to find that the testimony of 'Christians' is very poor.

We consider the hard lives of saints in history, and their significant disadvantages, and yet we see that very many Christians lived far more glorifying lives than churchgoers today. Men, women and even children were prepared to die a horrible death in order to avoid celebrating the Roman Mass under Bloody Mary Tudor.³⁷ Today, church leaders go to ecumenical meetings where the Mass is celebrated and say it is a good thing.

Despite having no Bible concordance, no Bible dictionary and no other resources, many historic Christians knew their Bible far better than modern believers. Indeed, many supposed modern Christians don't even take a Bible to church and seldom read it. In the past believers learned Scripture by heart and knew where to find verses from memory. Today, even with concordances, many are unable to supply proof texts for doctrines.

In the past, family devotions were extremely important. Children were raised on Bible stories and doctrine and were trained in godliness from a young age; many never went to school. Maintaining a good character was considered vital; swearing was unheard of and thanks were given for meals. Christians did not gamble, drink alcohol, attend revelries and carousing and sought to do good. Today church leaders commit appalling sins and are instantly rehabilitated as if nothing had happened. Churchgoers openly commit significant sins, such as cheating the taxman, lying, slandering or committing fornication.

In much of history many believers not only had no Biblical resources, but had few other resources as well, such as pens, paper, folders, clips etc. They tended to write important

³⁶ An Islamist terrorist group based in Nigeria.

³⁷ Mary I (1516–58), daughter of Henry VIII, reigned 1553–8; known as Mary Tudor or Bloody Mary. In an attempt to reverse Britain's acceptance of Protestantism she instigated the series of religious persecutions by which she earned her nickname.

notes in their Bible with a pencil. Often Bibles would be filled with valuable information, underlining, bullet points, pithy sayings, quotes, home-made references and so on. I have one such Bible and it is a treasure. In some countries, such as Romania under the Communists, Bibles, paper and pens were not available for most until the 1980s. I know of people who wrote Bible portions on cut-up cement bags (made of paper), written with home-made charcoal, in the 1970s.

Now consider the fine testimony of historic believers who had none of the great advantages that you have today and yet they maintained a godly, wonderful testimony, sometimes to the death. What are you doing with your advantages? The first thing is to give thanks.

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