

Seeing life through the lenses, lessons of Jesus

It wasn't until I reached my 40s that I began to notice how much fine print there is in life. Literally.

Near-sighted as I am, I resisted bifocals as long as I could, finding them awkward and dizzying. Particularly in the old days, when the only option available was a bifocal lens with annoying lines, I wasn't willing to make the effort. With a stubborn squint I could read footnotes and label instructions, and that was good enough for me.

Years passed, my vision worsened, and I was no longer able to escape the inevitable. Fortunately for me, with graduated bifocal lenses the adjustment was not nearly as difficult as I had feared. I could read even the smallest print again — as long as I tilted my head at just the right angle.

More years passed, and I found myself whispering to altar servers holding the sacramentary to "Back up," since it is easier to read words a few feet away than right in front of me. Now, if the server stands too close, I back up. Now, if I want to read the fine print, I take off my glasses.

As a child, I perceived that life was quite simple. Wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, come home, play with friends, eat supper, do homework, go to bed. There was fun in friendship and family, mysterious peacefulness at church and lazy hours of freedom dreamed away with imagination. There were consequences to misbe-



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havior, bad grades to reward laziness and a neighborhood network of moms and dads to enforce commonly held rules.

Unexpected trials

In early adolescence I noticed hints that life is not as carefree as I had thought.

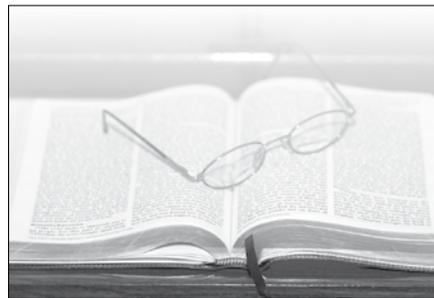
Rumors of nuclear bombs and bomb shelters in the neighborhood fascinated and frightened. The assassination of President Kennedy, reported by our principal on the loudspeaker, and later the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, were nightmares anyway one looked at them. The war in Vietnam, the personal problems of friends and family, the struggle to grow up: everything

pointed to the inescapable conclusion that life is not always simple. There is fine print, hard to read and hard to decipher.

Life is rarely simple. Sadly, for a variety of reasons some children never have the opportunity to experience a

carefree childhood. Sooner or later, all of us face complicated problems requiring complicated solutions. Life can become so complex, our worlds turned so utterly upside down, that we wonder if the simple lessons we learned as children suffice for the real world. The fine print can be so overwhelming that in disappointment and desperation

Are the simple lessons
of childhood — the
simple lessons of faith
— inadequate for an
adult life?



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some folks reject those lessons completely. Why did they (why did God?) dupe me into believing back then that life is simple?

Part of maturing is learning the hard lesson that the fine print — unexpected, undeserved trials, the stuff no one could warn us about — is part of life. We move from the nearsightedness of youth, in which the world is comprised of my house and neighborhood, to a farsighted capacity to see everything, the good and the bad. As little by little we understand hazards and complications, as we gradually recognize through friendship that we are not alone on the rough road, and as we are steadily stretched beyond ourselves in compassion for others, we are less startled by the fine print (even if no less infuriated or saddened by it at times). We might wish things could be simple as they were before, but in our heart of hearts we know that will not happen.

Mature discipleship

But are the simple lessons of childhood — the simple lessons of faith — inadequate for an adult life?

The Bible I use most often has tiny footnotes and cross-references I cannot read without taking off my bifocals. They give background information and explanations of difficult texts, but they don't change the message. They don't give complicated answers to complicated problems. Instead, they reinforce God's simple, timeless message to a people all too familiar with disappointment, failure, unexpected tragedy and unspeakable suffering. The fine print in the Bible reads the same as the large print:

I created you to share my life. Never forget I love you. I love you so much that when you ran away I sent my Son to bring you back. There is no reason to be afraid. Love others. Love yourself. Ask one another's forgiveness. Confess your sins and accept my forgiveness. Trust me. Be patient. Be generous. Be kind. Be peacemakers. Be thankful. Resist the devil and he will take flight. Pray without ceasing. Take up your cross and follow me. Take and eat my body broken for you, drink my blood poured out for you. I will never abandon you. Read further, and read again.

Indeed the fine print in the Bible reads the same as the large print, no matter what situation we find ourselves facing. To say that God's lessons are simple, however, is not to imply that they are naive, that they don't connect with the real world. Who better than Jesus understands the burdens of this world? The key to maturing as his disciple is to trust that his are the most important lessons to know by heart, the most important lenses we will ever need to see our way through the labyrinth of life.