

# **How Church Could (Literally) Save Your Life**



**Rebecca  
McLaughlin**

“The empirical research on religion and health could be seen as an invitation back to communal religious life for those who (for a range of reasons) are not currently part of a faith community. Rebecca McLaughlin issues that invitation in a most compelling manner.”

**Tyler VanderWeele**, Professor of Epidemiology, Harvard School of Public Health; Director of the Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University

“In medical practice, doctors often suggest that diagnosis is easy but therapy is difficult. Rebecca McLaughlin challenges this assertion. Here she reviews the scientific evidence and proposes a treatment for our physical and psychological woes that is readily available, efficacious, and free of charge. Best of all, you don’t need a doctor’s prescription. The question for us all is this: Will we trust the data and swallow the pill?”

**Lydia S. Dugdale, MD**, Dorothy L. and Daniel H. Silberberg Professor of Medicine, Columbia University Medical Center; author, *The Lost Art of Dying: Reviving Forgotten Wisdom*

“In an era of dechurching, this book surprises with emerging evidence that going to church has significant benefits. But there is more at stake here than our physical and mental health. Engaging understandable doubts, McLaughlin shows how Jesus helps us understand ourselves and our world—and offers nothing less than ultimate healing.”

**John R. Peteet, MD**, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

“A wonderful little book. Rebecca McLaughlin makes a powerful case for the mental, physical, moral, and spiritual benefits of going to church, blending scientific research with personal stories and wise application.”

**Andrew Wilson**, Teaching Pastor, King’s Church London

“Rebecca McLaughlin functions a bit like an oracle to me—her work is consistently on point and timely; her instincts point true gospel north. For centuries, Christians have claimed that following Jesus leads to life and happiness. This helpful book shows that even modern social science is beginning to say, ‘Yes and amen!’ Characteristic of Rebecca’s style, this book is carefully researched and evenly reasoned. Whether preparing a talk, talking with a friend, or teaching your kids, you’ll undoubtedly find yourself turning to it again and again.”

**J. D. Greear**, Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina; author, *Everyday Revolutionary: How to Transcend the Culture War and Transform the World*

“This data-rich, clear case for attending church confirms that we were made to worship. In McLaughlin’s final prescription we find the ultimate reason to attend church: Christ. For the skeptic or the waning churchgoer, this well-written and deeply researched book will inspire.”

**Alan Noble**, Professor of English, Oklahoma Baptist University; author, *On Getting Out of Bed*

“We can be quick to criticize the church, both its structures and its people, without fully considering what we lose by avoiding it. In this concise and thoughtful book, Rebecca McLaughlin makes a compelling case for how regular participation in a local church profoundly impacts our mental, physical, moral, and spiritual well-being. Backed by substantive research, she invites readers to take an honest look at the long-term impact of staying away and reminds us of the lifesaving strength and flourishing found in worshipping with other believers week after week.”

**Elizabeth Woodson**, Bible teacher; podcaster; author, *Embrace Your Life*; *From Beginning to Forever*; and *Live Free*

# How Church Could (Literally) Save Your Life

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# How Church Could (Literally) Save Your Life

Rebecca McLaughlin

*How Church Could (Literally) Save Your Life*

© 2025 by Rebecca McLaughlin

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover image: Getty Images

Cover design: David Fassett

First printing 2025

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-9969-9

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9971-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9970-5

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McLaughlin, Rebecca, 1980– author

Title: How church could (literally) save your life / Rebecca McLaughlin.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, [2025] | Series: The Gospel coalition | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025006500 (print) | LCCN 2025006501 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433599699 trade paperback | ISBN 9781433599705 pdf | ISBN 9781433599712 epub

Subjects: LCSH: Church attendance | Mission of the church—United States | Mind and body—Religious aspects—Christianity | Mental health—Religious aspects—Christianity | Church attendance—United States

Classification: LCC BV4523 .M455 2025 (print) | LCC BV4523 (ebook) | DDC 264—dc23/eng/20250430

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025006500>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2025006501>

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Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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# Introduction

IMAGINE THIS BOOK filled with pills instead of pages. You open it and fifty-two neatly laid out tablets meet your eyes. If you're young and healthy, you might think, *I don't need these*. You either throw them out or stash them in a box somewhere for future use. If you're older or suffer from chronic physical or mental illness, you may be more intrigued. What if this is just the medication you're looking for?

This book isn't a pillbox. But it does contain a prescription. The script is for something that—if taken at least weekly—could elongate your life expectancy by seven years, significantly increase your chance of happiness, and substantially reduce the likelihood you'll suffer from depression.

Thinking this is too good to be true, you check for side effects. They're listed as a greater sense of meaning, greater likelihood of volunteering, and more generosity toward those in need. Once again, you're skeptical. This must be a scam.

You turn to the back cover to see where this information comes from. There you find this medication has been extensively tested by none other than the Harvard School of Public Health.

Would you take the pills?

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In a 2016 article for *USA Today*, Harvard School of Public Health Professor Tyler VanderWeele and journalist John Siniff posed this question:

If one could conceive of a single elixir to improve the physical and mental health of millions of Americans—at no personal cost—what value would our society place on it?

Going a step further, if research quite conclusively showed that when consumed just once a week, this concoction would reduce mortality by 20% to 30% over a 15-year period, how urgently would we want to make it publicly available?<sup>1</sup>

Professor VanderWeele is director of the human flourishing program at Harvard. He's a literal world expert on what's good for you and me. So, what's this magic potion he's found?

We may think VanderWeele has conjured up a health-enhancing drug. Perhaps he's found a side-effect-free diet pill? Or some safe substance that will make you want to exercise? Or maybe yoga, meditation, or some novel superfood? But VanderWeele goes on: "The good news is that this miracle drug—religion, and more specifically regular church attendance—is already in reach of most Americans. In fact, there's a good chance it's just a short drive away."

Whatever your beliefs, my guess is that you wouldn't expect a Harvard professor to write you this prescription: "Church. Take once a week (or more) for best effects." But study after study has shown that people who attend religious services once a week or more are happier, healthier, and longer-lived than those who don't. If any other practice had the same effects, it would be widely advertised in public health campaigns.

I wonder how that information lands for you.

Many today see church as outdated, unnecessary, or even harmful. Maybe you identify as "spiritual, but not religious." You'd rather climb a mountain or gaze up at the stars than go to church. Perhaps you've been put off by racism, abuse, hypocrisy, or hateful attitudes. Church is the last place you would want to show up on a Sunday. Perhaps you grew up in a different religious tradition. At this point, you don't

regularly attend religious services, but it would feel offensive for someone to invite you to church. Or maybe you identify as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular,” and your first thought on hearing about the benefits of church is that they must be explained by community support. If one of these describes you, I’m honored you’d take time to read this book. You’re likely someone who thinks carefully and wants to see the data before you make a decision. My hope is that the data in this book will give you food for thought.

Maybe you feel less skeptical and more wistful when you hear talk of church. Perhaps you weren’t raised in church, but you’ve seen how meaningful it is to other people, and you feel a little robbed. Perhaps you used to go to church, but then you moved to a new city and haven’t found a new church. Perhaps you stopped attending during COVID and never quite got back into the habit. Perhaps you went through a divorce, or changed your job, or your kids had Sunday morning soccer games, and church just quietly slid off your weekly calendar. Perhaps you’re single and the church you went to seemed to revolve around married couples. Maybe you found yourself out of step with others at your church politically and you stopped attending. Or you became depressed or struggle with anxiety, and making it to church on Sundays just feels too hard.

If one of these scenarios describes you, you're not alone. These are some of the reasons why, in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, forty million Americans (around 12 percent of the population) have stopped attending church.<sup>2</sup> If you don't see yourself as a religious person, you might think this is good news. Many think that less religion means less bigotry and more happy, psychologically healthy, socially responsible citizens. But the results of what has been called "the great dechurching" in America have been measurably bad. Less churchgoing has led to lower mental health and happiness, more loneliness, more drug abuse, more alcoholism, less volunteering, less giving to those in need, reduced life expectancy, and more suicides. Even the most skeptical experts acknowledge that declining church attendance in the United States and (over a longer time period) across the West has had devastating side effects.

In chapters 1 and 2 of this short book, we'll reckon with the data on the mental and physical health benefits of weekly church attendance. We'll see that these effects can't be explained away simply by social contact. As VanderWeele explains, "Social support is critical, yet this accounts for only about a quarter of the effect."<sup>3</sup> The majority of religious-service participants in the studies have been churchgoers, but most studies don't differentiate between different kinds

of religious services. So, for instance, people going to Jewish synagogues once a week or more report benefits similar to those attending Christian churches. But the religious element seems to be vital. Parents who join the same people each week to cheer for their kids' sports team won't see the same level of benefit. We humans seem to thrive when we worship together.

In chapter 3, we'll look at the moral effects of going to church each week. However you identify religiously, my guess is that you see altruism (whether in the form of giving money or volunteering time to charitable causes) as beneficial for society. So we'll examine the effects someone's religious practices have on how they treat those most in need. We'll also ask a deeper question: Why do we think caring for the poor, sick, and vulnerable is good? This may seem like a strange question. But whether we realize it or not, it turns out that the seemingly self-evident truth that all human life is equally valuable—regardless of a person's age, sex, nationality, income level, or abilities—came to us from Christianity. If Christianity isn't true, we aren't left with a better secular foundation for our core belief that all humans are equal. We're left with that ethical rug pulled out from underneath our feet.

Finally, in chapter 4, we'll face the truth that haunts all of our lives. However healthy you and I may be—however much we work out, eat well, sleep, don't smoke, get annual

health checks, or even go to church—we'll all end up as corpses before long. So, in this book's last chapter, we'll look at Christianity's wild claim that anyone who puts her or his trust in Jesus will be carried right through death to everlasting life with him. You may think this is simply not believable today. But VanderWeele is one of many world-class scholars who would challenge that assumption. Rather than dismissing Christianity out of hand, VanderWeele suggests that "any educated person should, at some point, have critically examined the claims for Christianity and should be able to explain why he or she does, or does not, believe them."

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If you've never been to church with any regularity before, my hope is that this book will make you want to try it out. If you were once a regular attender, perhaps you'll think of coming back. On the last page, you'll find a website and a QR code that will help you get connected to a church in your area, and you'll see a list of questions frequently asked by those considering going to church (What can I expect? What should I wear? etc.).

If you hate church and everything it stands for, I'm thankful you've read this far. I wrote another book especially for



you. It's called *Confronting Christianity*, and it looks at twelve of the biggest reasons you may have for not considering the Christian faith. If you find this book even slightly thought-provoking, maybe you'll read that one too.

If you're not sure what to believe, but you need more hope and love and meaning in your life, my prayer is that this book will function as an invitation to look for a local church where you could find out more about who Jesus is and maybe start attending regularly. If church is, as VanderWeele claims, something of a "miracle drug," why not start popping that pill now?

## Mental Health Benefits

YESTERDAY, I TOOK A YOUNG FRIEND out to lunch to celebrate her one-year anniversary of joining our church. She wasn't raised in church, and like many Gen Zers, she tried a range of spiritual practices to fill that hole. She tried astrology, bought tarot cards, used crystals, and engaged in meditation. But nothing seemed to satisfy. She turned to substances to help her cope with life, bingeing on alcohol, smoking pot, and vaping. But none of these gave more than short-term fixes. She tried relationships with men and then with women, worked a range of different kinds of jobs, and lived on different continents. But all her various experiments left her feeling empty. Knowing she was struggling with mental health, she found a therapist and started taking antidepressants. But still her nagging sense of meaninglessness continued, chipping

away at her ability to flourish. It wasn't until she turned to Jesus and began attending church on Sundays and mid-week Bible studies that life started to make sense.

The details of my young friend's story are unique. But its broad contours are not. Many in the West today attempt to fill in their spiritual gap with New Age practices, a range of sexual relationships, and substance use. More people are in therapy and on antidepressants than at any other time. And yet our mental health across the West has nose-dived. As we'll see in this chapter, all our freedom to experiment and self-define without constraints has bred more misery than happiness. And one of the best things we can do to boost our mental health is what my friend eventually did: commit to church.

## Diagnosis

Since you're reading this, I'm willing to bet that either you've struggled with significant depression or you love someone who has. The new millennium has seen a surge in depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation across the West. Between 2015 and 2023 in the United States, the proportion of adults diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives went up by almost 10 percentage points to 29 percent. In the same period, the proportion of people who have been or are currently being treated for depression went up by 7 points to

17.8 percent.<sup>1</sup> We've removed much of the shame and stigma once associated with mental health struggles. But we haven't succeeded in reducing the struggles. Instead, they've spread like an oil spill, entrapping more and more of us like seagulls with our wings weighed down.

As my young friend experienced, this mental health disaster has hit women hardest. We see ourselves as living in the most pro-woman culture in all human history. Yet women in our culture are increasingly unhappy. Thirty-seven percent of women now report being diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives, compared with 20 percent of men.<sup>2</sup> The mental health crisis has also been particularly hard on younger people. In 2023, 27.3 percent of girls and 9.4 percent of boys ages twelve to seventeen reported experiencing a major depressive episode in the past year, more than double the rates in 2004.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, between 2009 and 2021, the share of American high school students who said they had "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness" rose from 26 percent to 44 percent.<sup>4</sup> Tragically, between 2007 and 2021, the suicide rate among ten-to-twenty-four-year-olds also increased by 62 percent.<sup>5</sup>

So, what's driving this depression and despair?

We might look to COVID to shoulder the blame. The effects of the social isolation bred by the pandemic are certainly

profound. But as one 2022 report points out, depression was “an escalating public health crisis” in the United States before we had even heard of COVID.<sup>6</sup>

One cause of the mental health crisis is the rise of smartphones and social media, which have driven isolation, negative comparison, and the social contagion of a host of mental health conditions. Again, women and young people have been most affected. By 2023, the evidence for the dangers of smartphone and social-media use for children and adolescents was so clear that the US surgeon general issued an official public health warning.<sup>7</sup> But smartphones can’t take all the blame.

Another factor undermining mental health is the decline in marriage. Many nonreligious people think increased societal acceptance of sex outside marriage leads to better mental health and greater happiness. But the data tells a different tale. For women in particular, increased numbers of sexual partners correlates with more depression, sadness, and suicidal ideation, and increased likelihood of substance abuse. Marriage has the opposite effect.<sup>8</sup> After analyzing data from a large-scale, long-term survey, University of Chicago Professor Sam Peltzman noted, “Being married is the most important differentiator with a 30-percentage point happy–unhappy gap over the unmarried.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, research conducted by the Institute for Family Studies found that “married people

are approximately 16% more likely than unmarried people to describe their mental health as ‘excellent’ or ‘very good’ within every category of formal education.”<sup>10</sup> Marriage, it turns out, functions less like a restrictive straitjacket and more like a protective seat belt.

But alongside the astronomic growth in smartphone use and the decline in marriage, it’s increasingly clear that one major driver of the mental health crisis is the decline in church attendance.

### **Prescription**

Even if you haven’t seen Disney’s *Encanto*, the song “We Don’t Talk About Bruno” probably lives somewhere in the basement of your mind. In this song, the Madrigal family tells Maribel about her uncle Bruno, who disappeared some years ago. The Madrigals mistakenly believe Bruno caused a host of bad things he prophesied. That song came to my mind just now as I clicked on link after link to articles with titles promising the “Top 10 Mental Health Hacks” or something similar. I wondered whether any would mention going to church. None did. You can try the exercise yourself.

Psychologists are keen to let us know how exercise, good sleep, and eating healthy foods can boost our mental health and happiness. They advocate yoga, mindfulness,

and meditation. But like the awkward uncle we're all trying to forget, we don't talk about "organized religion."

Like Bruno in his family's perception, church often has negative associations. We've all heard stories of people who at last felt free to be themselves when they left church behind. Maybe that was your experience. What's more, in a culture that promotes self-love, unbounded freedom, and the good of always following our hearts, some Christian teachings—like the idea that many of our deep desires are sinful—seem like they'd be bad for mental health and happiness. Before she turned to Jesus, the young friend I mentioned earlier had a mug that said, "Nobody's perfect. I'm nobody." But when she finally became convinced that Christianity is true, one thing that brought relief was the new understanding of herself the Bible gives. Whereas she'd tried to believe she was basically good, the Christian message gave her tools to recognize the many ways she was in fact quite bad. At the same time, her newfound faith gave her deep confidence she is loved by the Creator God of all the universe, who sent his Son to die for her.

Many in our culture think prioritizing self-love and rejecting the uncomfortable beliefs that come with Christianity will lead to happiness. But the evidence is quite the opposite. Going to church weekly actually is one of the best protections against depression, sadness, and suicidal ideation anyone

has found. A 2022 analysis of studies showed “a roughly 33 percent reduction in the odds of subsequent depression for those attending services at least weekly versus not at all.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, if you aren’t currently a churchgoer and you start attending weekly, you reduce your chances of developing depression by a third.

A medication this effective would be widely prescribed. But while your therapist or doctor may encourage yoga, meditation, or more time outside in nature, he or she almost certainly won’t recommend you go to church. The benefits of “organized religion” don’t fit with the big story we are telling in the West about the goodness of abandoning traditional beliefs. So, despite the studies showing how good religious services can be for people’s mental health, we don’t talk about Bruno.

Can these positive effects be explained away because those battling depression are less likely to have energy for church? That’s a great question. The answer is no. Studies have controlled for baseline depressive symptoms and found that church really is making a difference. If you’re currently depressed, the thought of getting out of bed on Sunday morning and heading to a church can feel completely overwhelming. Especially if you don’t already have a church community, the idea of going to a place where you don’t yet know people—and might not



know the songs they'll sing or prayers they'll pray—may feel like a steep hill to climb. I've had friends struggling with depression share the difficulty of making it to church.

But evidence shows that attending each week is more like a life rope—even if it takes a lot of effort to grab hold and cling on. Not only do churchgoers cut their chances of depression by a third; depressed people who attend church weekly also have a significantly better chance of recovering than those who don't.<sup>12</sup> Instead of dragging you still further down into depression, church could be just what you need to pull you out. But like any other medication, you'll need to stay the course to see the positive effects.

You may read this and think, *You just don't get it. I've been hurt by church.* Maybe you've experienced hypocrisy, judgmental attitudes, or even terrible abuse. I know people who've been profoundly hurt in church and who bear scars of pain and disillusionment from the experience. Just as our families can be the places of greatest love and of most horrific pain, so church can be a place of safety or of harm. But just as growing up in an unhealthy family wouldn't lead you to give up on family for good, so the experience of an unhealthy church need not mean giving up on church. A genuinely loving, healthy church may be just what you need to heal. Indeed, it can be literally lifesaving.

When it comes to the devastating topic of suicide, the difference between those who regularly attend religious services and those who never do is stark. Professor VanderWeele's research has found that women who never attend religious services are *five times more likely* to end their own lives than those who attend weekly or more.<sup>13</sup> I was so stunned when I first read this study that I emailed VanderWeele to ask if it was really representative. He responded that it was not an outlier. Indeed, VanderWeele has estimated that "approximately 40% of the rise in suicide rates between 1999 and 2014 may be attributable to declining service attendance."<sup>14</sup>

To be clear, this doesn't make churchgoers immune to suicidal ideation any more than they're immune to depression more generally. One of our church members who attends and serves faithfully struggles with chronic suicidal ideation and has appropriately sought both medical and spiritual help. But any honest suicide prevention campaign ought to include a recommendation to try attending religious services. It's one of the best protections against suicide anyone has found.

So, is church like an antidepressant—good for people struggling with mental health but quite unnecessary for those who aren't? No. Worshiping alongside others seems not only to protect us from emotional distress but also to increase our

happiness. A 2019 report found that in the United States, 36 percent of adults who go to church regularly describe themselves as “very happy,” compared with just 25 percent of adults who identify as religious but don’t go to church or who don’t identify with any one religion. This phenomenon isn’t unique to the United States. In Australia, for instance, 45 percent of churchgoing adults say they are very happy, compared with 33 percent of those who are religiously unaffiliated.<sup>15</sup> People who go to church each week tend to feel happier, enjoy higher life satisfaction, and have more of a sense of purpose than those who don’t. They’re also more optimistic about the future and have more self-control.<sup>16</sup>

Again, this data doesn’t fit the modern Western script. We’re taught that organized religion, with its talk of sin and self-denial, is a drain on human happiness. We’re urged to live our dreams and find our bliss, like solo voyagers charting our own course to satisfaction. But like a little rowboat ill-equipped to make it on the sea, we’re far more likely to get shipwrecked if we aim for happiness on our own. Joining a large crew with a greater purpose and mission—one defined not by self-fulfillment but by love of God and others—turns out to be better for our mental health and happiness.

A few months after she’d joined our church, the young friend I mentioned earlier volunteered for our annual Christ-

mas tree giveaway, which features a live-animal petting zoo in the church building. After the giveaway, my friend and I were part of the cleaning crew, and she was tasked with mopping up the goat pee that had leaked onto the floor. “Welcome to the Christian life!” I quipped. She replied, “I’m having the best time!” The mission of serving other people arm-in-arm with friends is a vital element of Christian ethics. It’s also powerfully tied to human flourishing.

If you, like me, are raising kids, I have no doubt you want them to grow into happy, healthy, caring grown-ups. If you had a religious upbringing you hated, or if you weren’t raised religious, you may think keeping your kids away from church will give them better odds of flourishing. But once again, the data says the opposite. Taking our kids to church each week is one of the best things we can do for both their present and their future mental health and happiness. In fact, VanderWeele suggests that “declining [service] attendance from 1991 to 2019 accounted for 28 percent of the increase in depression among adolescents.”<sup>17</sup>

As a mother of two adolescent girls, I’m heartbroken over the mental health crisis in their demographic. I see so many fellow parents feeling helpless as their kids spiral off into depression or anxiety. This horror can strike even the most church-invested family. Nonetheless, the data shows that

one of the best things we can do to protect our children's mental health is to take them to church once a week or more. The evidence is so strong that in 2019, therapist Erica Komisar wrote a *Wall Street Journal* article titled "Don't Believe in God? Lie to Your Children." Komisar began, "As a therapist, I'm often asked to explain why depression and anxiety are so common among children and adolescents. One of the most important explanations—and perhaps the most neglected—is declining interest in religion."<sup>18</sup>

A few months ago, I sat next to a fellow Brit on a plane. She told me she'd recently found her six-year-old son in tears. When she asked what was wrong, her son asked, "What's the point of life if we're just going to die someday?" She told me the question had shaken her, because she knew she didn't have an answer. Many parents in the West today have stopped encouraging their kids to believe in God and focused on telling them to believe in themselves. But deep down, children know they cannot be the center of their universe. Over time, they come to feel less like shining stars and more like they're being sucked into a black hole.

The positive effects of being raised in church can last long after children have left home. In 2018, VanderWeele and his colleague Dr. Ying Chen published results from a study that followed five thousand adolescents over an eight-year period.

Their study found that a religious upbringing contributed to a host of positive health and well-being outcomes later in life. For instance, people raised attending services at least weekly are 18 percent more likely to report high levels of happiness as young adults (ages twenty-three to thirty), 12 percent less likely to have high depressive symptoms, and 33 percent less likely to use illegal drugs. Kids raised in church also go on to have a greater sense of life satisfaction and more purpose, are more likely to forgive others, and are more likely to volunteer.<sup>19</sup> What's more, a 2012 study found that children who regularly attended religious services were 40 percent more likely to graduate from high school and 70 percent more likely to go to college than their non-churchgoing peers.<sup>20</sup> Reporting on one large-scale study, Chen concluded, "Many children are raised religiously, and our study shows that this can powerfully affect their health behaviors, mental health, and overall happiness and well-being."<sup>21</sup>

### **Directions for Use**

As I've mentioned, none of this research means those who go to church each week can't struggle with severe, ongoing mental health challenges. My friend Alan Noble has written a helpful book for Christians who (like him) struggle

profoundly. It's titled *On Getting Out of Bed: The Burden and Gift of Living*. At times, Christians have set a harmful expectation that believers shouldn't suffer from depression or anxiety—or that if they do, they should only turn to Scripture, prayer, and the church for help. But throughout the last two thousand years, some of the most influential Christians have had major mental health challenges. For instance, the nineteenth-century English preacher Charles Spurgeon, who was an incredibly powerful communicator of the good news about Jesus, had bouts of deep depression. "I pity a dog who has to suffer what I have," Spurgeon reflected.<sup>22</sup>

Christians who experience depression should be encouraged to seek clinical and spiritual help. "Do not think it unspiritual to remember that you have a body," Spurgeon remarked. "The physician is often as needful as the minister." Having a full range of options for support is helpful, especially for those who have experienced abuse and other kinds of devastating trauma. Yet therapy and medications won't provide the true community and purpose we all need.

The Christian life directs our eyes away from self-fulfillment, self-belief, or self-love and toward to one who gave his life for love of us and calls us to lay down our lives for one another (1 John 3:16). It means we must put others first, and sometimes it means mopping up the goat pee on the

floor. As my young friend experienced firsthand, the evidence that church is good for mental health is undeniable. But like most medical prescriptions, it comes with directions for use: take once a week or more.



