

Catching up with Jimmy Carter

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(RNS) Jimmy Carter was president for four years, but his new book is based on a role that he's held for nearly 70 years: Sunday school teacher.

"Through the Year with Jimmy Carter: 366 Daily Meditations from the 39th President," offers advice for Christians and provides insights into his life as president, submarine officer, missionary and husband.

Carter, 87, answered questions about prayer, death and relating to non-Christians. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Is this a devotional written by a Baptist who happens to have been president, or by a president who happens to be a Baptist?

A: It's by a Baptist who happens to be a president. It's a summary of 45-minute lessons, each one reduced to one page.

Q: The lessons published in this book include some you taught during your presidency. Did you have a different approach -- or subjects you didn't touch -- when you were leading the country?

A: No, I didn't have a different subject. What I try to do each Sunday is begin my lesson for about 10 or 15 minutes discussing current events, the recent experiences that I have had or where I'm going next week. And then seeing how that applies to biblical principles, basic moral values that apply to every human life.

Q: You talk openly about parts of your personal life, such as disagreements with your wife, or selfishness. Do you think that helped your classes relate to you more as a fellow Christian than a former president?

A: I think it does. I know that everybody in the audience has similar personal relationships at one time in their life. And so I try to apply what has happened to me

and how I withstood those challenges in my own life in a way that might be applicable to other people's lives.

Q: You also admitted that it's sometimes hard for you to pray. Why is that?

A: Sometimes I feel a little bit estranged from religious factors or from God.

One time that I remember specifically: I ran for governor the first time and I was a moderate on the race issue. I wanted to see an end of segregation in the South and my main opponent was an arch segregationist in Georgia, Lester Maddox. And eventually he won the election and I lost so I kind of gave up on God and on my faith.

But I had a very famous evangelical sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton. She ministered to me and pointed out to me that when we faced a serious loss or sorrow or disappointment in our life, or failure, that that should strengthen us, give us patience and actually improve our ties with God because we can't solve our problems on our own.

Q: You say Christians need to share their relationship with Christ with the world. What if you approach uninterested non-Christians?

A: If they say "I'm not interested," I'm reluctant to push it. It depends on the circumstances. But quite often I find that non-Christians are interested in the basic elements of Christianity. I've had national leaders, presidents of countries when I was in office -- the communist leader of Poland, the dictator of South Korea at the time -- who actually asked me about my Christian faith and I ministered to them.

Q: You quote Jesus speaking about hope in eternal life. Do you ever fear death?

A: No, I don't fear death. I'm not looking forward to dying. I'd like to live as long as I can in a healthy and productive way, but I don't have any fear of death.

Q: Is there one particular issue of injustice you think deserves special attention?

A: The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. That's the biggest need that's not been met yet in the world, and the biggest challenge that we have.

Q: How much longer do you expect to teach Sunday school at Maranatha Baptist Church?

A: We have a very small church. We only have about 30 members that come every Sunday. But we have anywhere from 100 to 800 visitors who come to our little church just to hear me teach. That's a special ministry that we have. So I'll teach as long as I'm physically and mentally able and as long as the church wants me to continue.

Q: You've taught the Bible for decades. Are there still some lessons to be learned?

A: Sure, there are. My wife and I read the Bible every night just before we go to bed. One night she reads it aloud and the next night I read it aloud. We actually do it in Spanish so we can learn more about Spanish language. You get different inspiration or ideas from the Bible as you read it a second time or a third time or, sometimes, a 10th time.