

As decades pass, there are certain events and cultural icons and personages that naturally fade in our memory. Of course, that's true regardless of country or culture. Take the era of the Great Depression and World War II in America. These two adjacent, earth-shattering events changed the lives of virtually every person in America. But that was decades ago, and the shrinking of awareness of such catastrophic events is inevitable...even though we live today with the vast impact of those events and the people who impacted us, for better or for worse. People like Hitler. Churchill. Roosevelt. Oppenheimer. Stalin.

One of the amazing people who lived during that era, dying in 1943 but still capturing the imagination of young people for decades after World War II...well, he's all but forgotten today, lost in the maze of current agendas. When I mention his name to young people, they not only don't know his story, they often don't even know his name! Curious about who that is? It's George Washington Carver! What an amazing person Carver was, what an example he is to everyone who takes a serious look into his life! Let's do exactly that.

George Washington Carver was born into slavery in the 1860s in America and lived to be almost 80 years old. A few weeks after he was born, his father was killed in an accident. When Carver was a baby, kidnappers took him, his mother, and a sister. George was found, but he never saw his mother and that sister again. Two other sisters died thereafter, but George and his brother Jim were taken in by Moses and Sue Carver, childless German immigrants to America living in Missouri.

George left the Carver family at age ten and began an amazing itinerant life, generally in Missouri and Kansas, working at odd jobs and attending schools catch-as-catch-can, a difficulty in itself for a young Black boy. You name it, laundryman, cook, groomer, stenographer—he got that last job from learning skills at a business college...living with Black families who opened their homes to him. His only remaining family, his brother, died of smallpox. He was accepted at a college but refused admission because of his race. Then he homesteaded in western Kansas, scratching out a living until a major drought stopped that.

Carver moved to Iowa and started attending Simpson College, studying art and music. He won Honorable Mention for a painting at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. His paintings of plants caught the eye of his art teacher and she recommended that he study agriculture at Iowa State, and Carver was the first African American at that college. A couple of Carver's professors advocated for him, and both later served as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. Carver was active in a number of campus clubs, including serving as missionary chairman for the YMCA. You see, along the way of the orphan's path, Carver became a very serious Christian—by his own testimony responding to the Lord at age ten. Yes, happily adopted by God!

George earned his bachelor's degree in agriculture in 1894...then his master's degree in 1896...and then became Iowa State's first African American faculty member. Needless to say, none of his family attended the celebrations of his accomplishments—those family members were long gone. But that's not what George Washington Carver dwelt on...here's an excerpt of his letter to friends: "...The Lord is wonderfully blessing me and has for these many years. ... I had some paintings at the Cedar Rapids Art exhibit, as there myself and had some work selected and sent to the World's Fair, was also sent to Lake Geneva twice to the YMCA as a representative from our college. And the many good things the Lord has entrusted to my care are too numerous to mention here. Then last but not least, I have been elected Assistant Station botanist. I intend to take a post graduate course here, which will take two years."

This letter and more of Carver's faith-infused correspondence are captured beautifully in a book by William Federer, and I have re-quoted from Federer's selections in this episode. Carver became very famous—just check Amazon and other resources to discover very captivating information about Carver.

But our story so far is incomplete. The justly-famous Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama—which is a whole 'nother worthy story—offered Carver a position and George spent the rest of his life serving at Tuskegee. Here's a note from Booker T. to George, when he was recruiting him: "Our

students are poor, often starving. They travel miles of torn roads, across years of poverty. We teach them to read and write, but words cannot fill stomachs. They need to learn how to plant and harvest crops...I cannot offer you money, position, or fame. The first two you have. The last, from the place you now occupy, you will no doubt achieve. These things I now ask you to give up. I offer you in their place—work, hard hard work—the challenge of bringing people from degradation, poverty, and waste to full manhood.”

Wow. And Carver’s quick response? “I am looking forward to a very busy, pleasant, and profitable time at your college and shall be glad to cooperate with you in doing all I can through Christ who strengtheneth me to better the condition of our people. ...Providence permitting, I will be there in Nov[ember]...”

Carver immediately started an Ag Department at Tuskegee, teaching students and nearby farmers. Much of the soil throughout the South was depleted due to farmers growing cotton each and every year. Erosion abounded. So Carver taught about fertilization and crop rotation—recommending legumes like peanuts and sweet potatoes as alternatives, so as to harvest cash crops while replenishing the soil. You know, applied science! When so many peanuts were grown in response, George then legendarily discovered hundreds of uses for the peanut and the sweet potato, too. But, unlike so many colleges nowadays, Carver didn’t enjoy generous taxpayer-funded research grants. No. It was George and God. ...Really? Yes!...

When Carver spoke to a women’s church group in New York City, he said, “God is going to reveal to us things He never revealed before if we put our hands in His. No books ever go into my laboratory. The thing I am to do and the way of doing it are revealed to me. I never have to grope for methods. I am inspired to create something new. Without God to draw aside the curtain I would be helpless.” This assertion echoes none other than Jesus telling His disciples that “The Holy Spirit teaches all things.” John 14:26

But the editors at the *New York Times* disapproved, editorializing that “Men of Science Never Talk That Way.” Carver wrote back to that newspaper, stating his academic credentials from Iowa State and Simpson College and listing a number of key luminaries who impacted his life, scientifically and otherwise. But these key words of Carver capture the core gist of his response: “Inspiration is never at variance with information; in fact, the more information one has, the greater will be the inspiration. Paul, the great Scholar, says, 2 Timothy 2:15, ‘Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.’” Carver continued with this: “Again [Paul] says in Galatians 1:12, ‘For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.’” Then Carver said this, “Many, many other equally strong passages could be cited, but these two are sufficient...”

Just as powerfully, Carver wrote an essay in 1930 titled *How to Search for Truth*, saying this: “I believe the Great Creator of the universe had young people in mind when the following beautiful passages were written: In the 12th chapter of Job and the 7th and 8th verses, we are urged thus: But ask now the beasts and they will teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee. Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee; and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. In St. John the 8th chapter and the 32nd verse, we have this remarkable statement: ‘And he shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. Were I permitted to paraphrase it, I would put it thus: And you shall know science and science shall set you free, because science is truth. There is nothing more assuring, more inspiring, or more literally true than the above passages from Holy Writ.’ Wow. So, science and the Scriptures incompatible? Science rightly used to deny that there’s a God? That’s a far cry from the mindset of George Washington Carver.

So, Carver’s impact? The Encyclopedia Britannica states that, “In 1942, the U.S. government allotted ... 5,000,000 acres of peanuts to farmers. Carver’s efforts had finally helped liberate the South from its excessive dependence on cotton.” So, here’s the question. Was George Washington Carver mistaken? Did Carver really just do “pure science,” divorced from God? Is our Christian learning only to be “theological?” Or does the Holy Spirit teach all things, as Jesus said? Carver. Slave. Then free. Orphan. Scientist. Professor. Believer. George. Washington. Carver. Indeed, a Christian who earned our awestruck remembrance!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Do you really believe the Holy Spirit teaches all things, as Jesus taught (John 14:26)? Describe how you can and do embrace and facilitate this teaching in your own life.
2. Few Americans have had more obstacles in their lifetime than George Washington Carver. What do you find compelling about his story of overcoming obstacles and critics? Be specific about how you can apply his approaches to your obstacles and critics.
3. George Washington Carver didn't think that science was ever remotely in conflict with Biblical truth, quite the contrary. Are you aligned with Carver?