

May/June 2024

DISCERN

A Magazine of *Life Hope & Truth*



Clinging to the
Anchor of Hope

Contents

Discern magazine (ISSN 2372-1995 [print]; ISSN 2372-2010 [online]) is published every two months by the Church of God, a Worldwide Association, as a service to readers of its LifeHopeandTruth.com website. *Discern's* home page is LifeHopeandTruth.com/Discern. Free electronic subscriptions can be obtained at LifeHopeandTruth.com/Discern. Contact us at info@DiscernMag.com.

Postmaster:

Send address changes to
P.O. Box 3490, McKinney, TX 75070-8189

© 2024 Church of God, a Worldwide Association, Inc.
All rights reserved.

Publisher:

Church of God, a Worldwide Association, Inc.,
P.O. Box 3490, McKinney, TX 75070-8189;
phone 972-521-7777; fax 972-521-7770;
info@cogwa.org; LifeHopeandTruth.com; cogwa.org

Ministerial Board of Directors:

David Baker, Arnold Hampton, Joel Meeker (chairman),
Larry Salyer, Richard Thompson, Leon Walker and
Lyle Welty

Staff:

President: Jim Franks; Editor: Clyde Kilough; Editorial
content manager: Mike Bennett; Managing editor:
David Hicks; Senior editor: David Treybig; Associate
designer: Elena Salyer; Associate editors: Erik Jones,
Jeremy Lallier; Assistant editor: Kendrick Diaz; Copy
editor: Becky Bennett; Social media: Hailey Willoughby

Doctrinal reviewers:

John Foster, Bruce Gore, Peter Hawkins, Jack Hendren,
Don Henson, Doug Johnson, Chad Messerly, Larry Neff

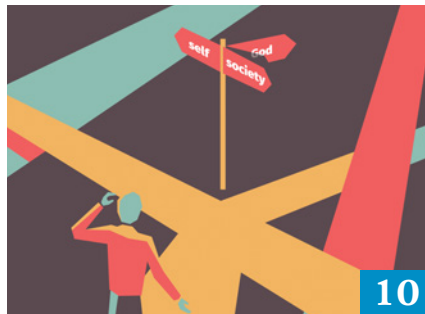
The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, Inc. has
congregations and ministers throughout the United
States and many other countries. Visit [cogwa.org/
congregations](http://cogwa.org/congregations) for information.

Donations to support *Discern* magazine and
LifeHopeandTruth.com can be made online at
LifeHopeandTruth.com/donate or by surface mail
to Church of God, a Worldwide Association, Inc.,
P.O. Box 731480, Dallas, TX 75373-1480. The Church of
God, a Worldwide Association, Inc. is organized and
operated as a tax-exempt organization in the United
States according to the requirements of IRS 501(c)(3).
Contributions are gratefully acknowledged by receipt.

Unsolicited materials sent to *Discern* magazine will
not be critiqued or returned. By submitting material,
authors agree that their submissions become
the property of the Church of God, a Worldwide
Association, Inc. to use as it sees fit.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated,
are taken from the New King James Version (© 1982
by Thomas Nelson, Inc.). Used by permission. All
rights reserved.

This publication is not to be sold. Free educational material.



10

Columns

3 Consider This
Finding the Power of Hope

22 Q&A
Answers to Your Biblical Questions

24 Christianity in Progress
What Can the Righteous Do as
the Foundations of Society Are
Destroyed?

27 Wonders of God's Creation
All the Better to See You With

28 Walk as He Walked
How Did Jesus Pray?

31 By the Way
Rivers at the Ends of the Earth

Feature

**4 Clinging to the Anchor
of Hope**
In spite of our accomplishments, the
world scene is often a depressing
one. God provides sure and
steadfast hope in the midst of it all.

Articles

**7 Four Pitfalls of Interpreting
Prophecy**
Prophecy can be challenging to
interpret, but avoiding common
pitfalls can prevent you from
believing misconceptions about the
future. What are they?



18



27

**10 Developing Christian
Character**
Growing to become like Jesus
Christ—developing Christian
character—is an essential part of
God's plan for us. What is godly
character? How do we build it?

**12 The Significance of Pentecost
and the Book of Joel**
Pentecost is most often associated
with the beginning of the Church.
Can we learn more about the
significance of Pentecost in the
book of Joel?

**15 Olympic Legends: The Boys
in the Boat**
This year's Olympics will bring new
stories of triumph. Few can top
the classic underdog story of the
American rowing team at the 1936
Berlin Olympics.

**18 Should We Worry About
Growing World Debt?**
World debt reached a record-
breaking \$313 trillion in 2023.
Should we be worried? And what
does the Bible say about such debt?

Finding the Power of Hope

Diep Ly Thanh knew hardship and adversity very well. Born blind and impoverished in Vietnam, she escaped with her family in a fishing boat at the age of 3, ultimately growing up as an immigrant in the United States.

Later known as Julie Yip-Williams (her Americanized, married name), she earned a law degree from Harvard, but gained her greatest recognition by authoring the 2019 bestseller *The Unwinding of the Miracle: A Memoir of Life, Death, and Everything That Comes After*.

This book tells her story of facing her greatest adversary of all—imminent death. At only 37, married with two small daughters, she was unexpectedly diagnosed with terminal cancer. She then chronicled her five-year journey through “the valley of the shadow of death.”

With remarkable transparency, she shared her struggles to make sense of it all and sort through the range of accompanying feelings—anger, joy, fear, sadness, courage, anxiety, acceptance, doubt. She wrote until, at the age of 42, she succumbed.

“Hope is a funny thing”

One of her biggest challenges was to hold onto hope. According to *The New York Times* obituary, “Ms. Yip-Williams wrestled with hope, which she cursed as an ‘illusory sentiment.’” Early in her fight, she stated, “Cancer crushes hope, leaving a wasteland of grief, depression, despair and a sense of unending futility.”

She also observed, “Hope is a funny thing, though. It seems to have a life and will of its own that I cannot control through the sheer force of my mind. It is irrepressible, its very existence inextricably tied to our very spirit, its flame, no matter how weak, not extinguishable.”

It’s true. Hope—expectation or desire for something to happen—seems to be hardwired into our human psyche. So many accounts exist of people, in the direst of circumstances, finding something to hope for and clinging onto it.

Shaping our hope

I saw my mother in Julie Yip-Williams’ words. They mirrored so much of what she experienced as cancer slowly took her life at age 47. After the initial shock of hearing the dreaded “C” word and bleak prognosis,

over the next 19 months, Mom worked through many of the same thoughts, emotions and questions.

I’m convinced that only when we face the toughest trials can we discover the depths of what we really are. That’s when the answer is revealed to the “what do I really believe in?” question. It’s vitally important. It shapes the way we deal with life. Or, even, the end of life. It shapes our hope.

Please give a thoughtful read to this issue’s lead article, “Clinging to the Anchor of Hope.” It describes the highest level of hope that exists—that which God holds out to each of us. It’s firm; it’s anchored in God’s promises.

This same hope formed over years in my mother’s life, and in facing death she held it dear. As her body weakened, that hope strengthened her courage, confidence, dignity and peace of mind. It not only saw her through to the end, but inspired everyone who walked with her.

Finding your way to hope

This article also touches on something else Mrs. Yip-Williams wrote about—the fact that “paradoxes abound in this life.” For example, “joy cannot exist without sadness. Relief cannot exist without pain. Compassion cannot exist without cruelty. Courage cannot exist without fear . . . Wisdom cannot exist without suffering.”

And where hope is concerned, she wrote, “Hope cannot exist without despair.”

The paradox is that we see so much despair in life today, but it doesn’t have to be that way! If only we would seek and follow God, that could be turned around, along with the sadness, pain, cruelty, fear, suffering and deprivation. God’s way of life today and His plan of salvation for the future offer not only hope, but joy, relief, compassion, courage and wisdom.

We all need the power of hope. Why not make God the anchor for yours?



Clyde Kilough
Editor

In spite of our accomplishments, the world scene is often a depressing one. God provides sure and steadfast hope in the midst of it all.

A small boat is seen from behind, navigating through a dark, stormy sea with white-capped waves. The sky is a deep, dark teal, filled with numerous stars. A prominent constellation of bright, glowing blue and white stars is connected by thin white lines, forming a large, intricate shape that resembles a crown or a complex geometric pattern. The light from the stars illuminates the water and the boat, creating a sense of hope and guidance in a dark, turbulent environment.

Clinging to the Anchor of Hope

According to some statistics, you and I are living in a golden era of humanity. Compared to most of recent history, today's average human is living longer, dying less violently, receiving a better education and living farther above the poverty line.

By nearly every conceivable metric of physical success, things are better today than they have been for a long time.

Modern medicine enables us to treat (and effectively eliminate) diseases that were once capable of destroying entire populations. Modern technology means that, with a few taps on a smartphone screen, we can easily accomplish tasks and access information in a way that would have either been impossible or required monumental effort just a few centuries ago.

And yet . . .

And yet when I look out at the state of the world, I don't come away with a renewed sense of hope.

More often than not, I come away depressed.

A survey of the world

It doesn't matter how many charts and graphs you show me—when I look out at the world, I don't see 8 billion people trending toward utopia.

I see world leaders who are completely unable to broker any kind of meaningful peace between turbulent nations, who are either powerless or unwilling to root out the unfettered greed and incompetence undergirding their own political power structures, who are expending more energy to control the narrative than to solve actual problems.

I see a parade of worldviews, increasingly untethered from reality, demanding to be taken seriously, vilifying anyone who doesn't immediately affirm and pledge support to whatever groundless delusion is on display.

I see more and more people clutching at their preconceived ideas and misconceptions, screaming to be heard and refusing to hear, jumping to conclusions and oversimplifying arguments when it suits them, calling for blood when the same is done to them.

I see conflicts that refuse to be resolved. I see good people dying too soon and wicked people living too long. I see self-destructive lifestyles being celebrated as beautiful and brave. I see reason and logic eroding. I see natural and man-made threats looming on the

horizon. I see families struggling to stay financially afloat. I see lies and misinformation running rampant. I see social media replacing meaningful social interactions.

I see all this, I hear that the world is getting better, and I wonder:

This is it?

This is what getting better looks like?

This is what succeeding looks like?

If this is humanity realizing its potential, then I can't find hope for the future by looking at the world.

Mercifully, I *can* find it by looking somewhere else.

The way that seems right

One of the fundamental tenets of the Bible is that, left to our own devices, humanity isn't capable of making life work.

Oh, people can *try*—and they'll certainly accomplish some impressive things along the way—but at the end of the day, “the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jeremiah 10:23).

And it's not just that we don't know the *best* way forward or that we're not as *efficient* as we could be. It's that even our best attempts will end only in failure. “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12).

Our world was set on its present course around 6,000 years ago, when the first man and first woman disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden tree. Instead of living forever with their Creator, Adam and Eve received the promise that they would “surely die” (Genesis 2:17; compare 3:19).

This world that we've been building since the dawn of humanity—this global experiment of what happens when we *do* try to direct our own steps—can end only one way:

In failure and death.

Becoming purposeless for a purpose

Paul wrote that “the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope” (Romans 8:20). The Greek word translated “futility” here can mean a “state of being without use or value” (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition*).

By disobeying God, Adam and Eve brought the creation into a state of futility. What God had created for a very specific purpose was now purposeless—and He allowed it to become that way.

Why?

Paul says that God subjected it to futility *in hope*. He had a plan for its future.

Paul's letter to the Romans fills in the rest of the gaps for us. The creation "eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God" (verse 19). This is an exceptionally important key to the puzzle. The creation, currently subjected to hopeful futility, "will be delivered from the bondage of corruption [or 'slavery to decay,' Common English Bible] into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (verse 21).

This is our hope: not just that God *could* rescue His decaying creation, but that He *will* rescue it—that He is *actively involved* in a plan that will set things right.

And you and I?

We get to be part of it.

Revealing the children of God

"The children of God."

That's us. Or, at least, that's what we have the potential to become. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). We are to believe His message, obey His instructions and think and act as He does.

As physical human beings living in a decaying creation filled with billions of people trying to direct their own steps and follow their own ways, we have the priceless hope that comes from knowing God's plan for the future:

"For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance" (Romans 8:22-25).

Hope as an anchor

For Christians, this hope is meant to be more than a nice thought we can reflect on from time to time. It's a hope based on a promise so certain, so definite, so

unshakable that we are willing to live our lives as if it's already come to pass.

The author of the book of Hebrews called our shared hope "an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast" (Hebrews 6:19).

An anchor is not an afterthought, but a lifeline.

The hope God gives us is an anchor for the core of our being.

The world can (and will) buffet us with waves of hopelessness, but our anchor of hope will keep us from drifting down those currents of despair. When we know God's plan—when we know what He's doing, when we know *why we're here*—we have access to an anchor strong enough and secure enough to see us through any and every trial.

That's not to say that any of it will be easy.

It's hard to look out at the more hopeless elements of the world—hard to live in it and experience it firsthand—but our anchor is designed to keep us connected to the incredible hope of what's coming.

Whether we lose jobs, friends or loved ones—whether we're ridiculed, maligned or mistreated—whatever the shape and size of our hardships, we know that this life is worth it *because* of what's coming.

We are called to be children of God.

We are called to both inherit and restore this world, working alongside God to do what no human being has the power to accomplish today:

To make a better future not just a *hope*, but a *reality*.

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:18-21).

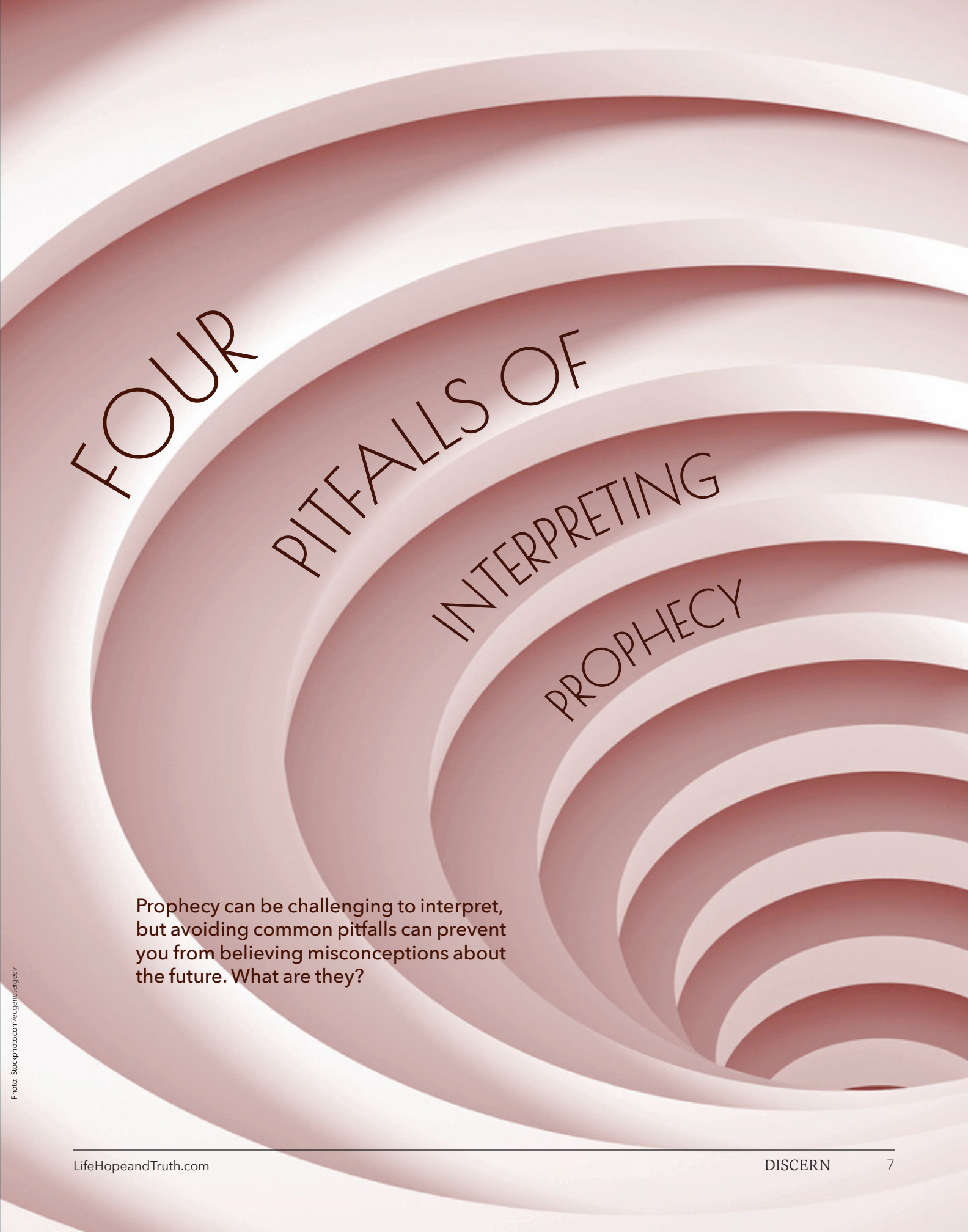
What's coming is beautiful and perfect and guaranteed to make even the worst moments of this life pale in comparison to its absolute splendor.

That reality isn't here yet—but *it's coming*.

And it starts with an anchor.

Learn more in our free booklet *Finding Hope in a Hopeless World*.

—Jeremy Lallier



FOUR PITFALLS OF INTERPRETING PROPHECY

Prophecy can be challenging to interpret, but avoiding common pitfalls can prevent you from believing misconceptions about the future. What are they?

It has been said that as much as one-third of the Bible is prophecy. And a quick search on the Internet will generate hundreds of resources promising to help you understand it.

The problem is, they often disagree with each other. They can't all be right. In fact, many misapply scriptures and grasp at straws to substantiate their pet theories.

Anyone who studies his or her Bible will encounter prophecy, and interpreting it is no cinch. Avoiding some common pitfalls can help keep us on the right track.

1. Allegorizing prophecy

While there is going to be debate about whether to interpret some passages literally or allegorically, a good approach would be to apply the wisdom of Occam's razor: the most direct answer or interpretation is usually the correct one.

Put simply, take prophecy at face value unless there's a compelling reason not to. Usually, the context will make it clear which reading is intended. But if we insist on a symbolic interpretation of a prophecy when it is not meant, we're bound to miss its true meaning. It also creates the risk of downplaying and minimizing realities that God wants to impress on our minds.

For example, consider Isaiah 11:6-9. The passage describes the nature of life on earth during the millennial reign of Jesus Christ. It speaks of a time when the earth is renewed, and the *entire* physical creation lives peaceably: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb" (verse 6).

But in his commentary Matthew Henry wrote, "This is fulfilled in the wonderful effect of the gospel upon the minds of those that sincerely embrace it; it changes the nature . . . When Paul, who had persecuted the saints, joined himself to them, then *the wolf dwelt with the lamb.*"

It's undeniable that accepting the gospel leads to a radical change of heart. But is this the meaning God intended in this passage? Is this a prophecy about aggressive men learning to get along with gentler ones? Why should a symbolic meaning trump a literal one?

Plenty of other passages portray the sweeping changes Christ will enact in short order when He returns; altering the nature of animals is just one. Other promises include a world devoid of war (Isaiah 2:4), where parched lands are transformed into lush gardens (Isaiah 51:3) and where poverty and starvation cease to exist (Isaiah 49:10).

These prophecies collectively fall under what Peter called the "times of restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21).

Henry saw them as "figurative promises," but the literal reading is more consistent with Scripture.

2. "Prophecy is really history"

Also, don't fall into the trap of thinking that *all* prophecy has already come to pass. Preterism is a view within professing Christianity that basically teaches all prophecy as history.

Preterists say, among other things, that Christ has already returned, Satan and the beast have already been cast into the lake of fire, the resurrection has already happened and the promised new heavens and earth have already arrived.

Preterism relies on spiritualizing prophecies. The only way its ideas can *seem* consistent with Scripture is by denying a literal return of Jesus Christ, proposing an ongoing metaphorical judgment for humanity and teaching a bitterly disappointing form of the resurrection. Its teachings are deeply flawed and challenge the very essence of Christianity.

But teaching certain prophecies as past when they are in fact future is nothing new. Do the names *Hymenaeus* and *Philetus* ring a bell? They were antagonists to the early Church, selling Jesus' disciples the lie that "the resurrection is already past." It was a belief that Paul condemned as cancerous and prone to "overthrow the faith of some" (2 Timothy 2:16-18).

The same can be said about many preterist views.

For instance, it's simply *impossible* to apply the prophecies of Revelation and Matthew 24 solely to a past time without compromising logic. The descriptions in Revelation are straightforward: incredible astronomical sights, global catastrophes, the death of a third of humanity and more.

Besides, if every prophecy had been fulfilled, the hopes of millions would be dashed.

3. Not recognizing prophetic time lapses

Some prophecies are fulfilled partially and then linger for a while before they reach their total fulfillment.

An example of this can be seen in Jesus Himself. One day He stood up in a synagogue and read a prophecy concerning Himself:

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD” (Luke 4:18-19).

That was all He read and claimed to fulfill (verse 21), but a flip to Isaiah shows the quotation was, in fact, longer. It continues: “[To proclaim] the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn” (Isaiah 61:2).

Why did He stop reading in the middle? In hindsight, the reason is obvious: only what He read applied to Him then. The remainder of Isaiah 61 is reserved for the future when He returns.

Prophecy can be like a coiled spring. At first glance, the tightly packed loops give the impression that their fulfillment will be close to one another, but when the spring is stretched out, the gaps and spaces become apparent.

Notice the same phenomenon in Jesus’ prophecy in John 5: “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation [or judgment, as the Greek *krisis* is most often translated]” (verses 28-29).

Just as in Isaiah 61:1-2, there is a prophetic time lapse. According to Revelation 20:4-5, the resurrection of the saints to life will occur at Christ’s return, followed 1,000 years later by “the rest of the dead” (or “those who have done evil,” as John 5:29 puts it).

Acknowledging possible time lapses within prophecies is crucial to correctly placing their fulfillment in the right sequence.

4. The cherry-picking fallacy

A huge obstacle to interpreting prophecy correctly is the human tendency to see only what we want to see. That is, we like to cling to the verses that support our views and ignore the rest.

An example of this can be seen in the widely taught doctrine of the rapture, introduced in the 19th century.

Many rapture proponents rest their belief on 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17:

“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the

trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”

If this were the only passage dealing with the nature of Jesus’ return, then a rapture might be believable. But other verses, including those that provide context to the ones above, contradict any such thing. The idea of Jesus appearing in secret to silently whisk away His followers to heaven is the result of cherry-picking. The complete picture emerges when the *whole* Bible is used.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul was comforting the brethren about Christians who had died. He said they would be resurrected when Jesus returns “with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God,” an event that could hardly be described as secret.

And the parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 indicates that this resurrection occurs at the sounding of “the last trumpet,” which the book of Revelation says is accompanied by “loud voices in heaven” that announce Christ’s reign (Revelation 11:15).

Zechariah 14:4 says, “And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives.”

Those scriptures alone create glaring issues for rapture proponents and show the folly of cherry-picking scriptures. (For a fuller treatment, see “[Will There Be a Secret Rapture?](#)”) The antidote to this approach is to use all the material within God’s Word before forming any conclusions.

Holding onto the prophetic word

Arming yourself with the knowledge of common pitfalls doesn’t guarantee perfect understanding, but it does help establish some guardrails.

Peter wrote that we would “do well to heed” prophecy (2 Peter 1:19). This wasn’t a command to understand every nuance of a given prophecy, and it especially wasn’t a suggestion to assign specific dates and people to certain prophecies. This was a general comment about how knowing prophecy keeps us mindful of what God has in store for His followers.

We shouldn’t want an inaccurate picture of His plan for us; we should want a clear vision in our minds.

Learn more in our helpful free booklet [How to Understand Prophecy](#).

—Kendrick Diaz

“We’re in a war,” my friend told me almost every week at church. He wasn’t talking about a military war, but about the temptations, trials and traps that a Christian striving to live in a godly way must face in this ungodly world.

Peter described one such battle. He said Lot “was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)” (2 Peter 2:7-8).

Knowing the enemies of Christian character

My friend was talking about the negative pulls of the world around us. We didn’t live in Sodom, but can anyone say our society is not slouching in the same direction?

He was talking about the attitudes and attacks that the Bible traces back to the evil one—Satan the devil.

He was talking about our natural, selfish desires—our “flesh” and its evil works (Galatians 5:19-21). Paul says those who do these things “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (verse 21).

Society, Satan and self. These can be formidable foes.

I’ve lost track of my friend over the years, but I am convinced he

has continued to fight the battles and will win the war. Why? Because he trusted in God and was developing Christian character.

What is Christian character?

Christian character is godly character. It is growing to think, act and become like God.

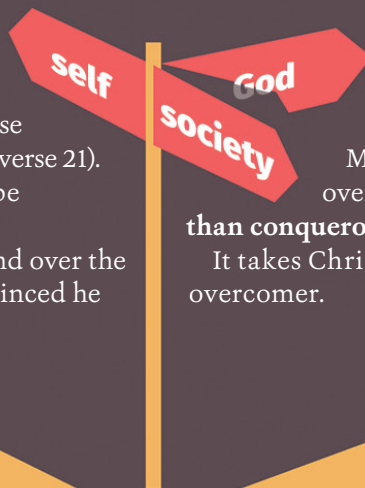
In his book *The Incredible Human Potential*, Herbert W. Armstrong wrote this definition of godly character: “It is the ability, in a separate entity with free moral agency, to come to the *knowledge* of the right from the wrong—the true from the false—and to choose the right, and possess the will to enforce self-discipline to do the right and resist the wrong” (p. 138).

The Bible calls on us to know the right, choose the right and do the right. This requires defeating the enemies.

The New King James Version uses the word *character* only three times in two verses, Romans 5:4 and Philippians 2:22.

More often, the Bible refers to those who overcome, who are conquerors and “**more than conquerors**” (Romans 8:37).

It takes Christian character to become an overcomer.



Growing to become like Jesus Christ—developing Christian character—is an essential part of God’s plan for us. What is godly character? How do we build it?



Developing Christian Character

The importance of Christian character

Paul wrote that God's plan for us includes growing in character. "We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

Developing Christian character is an essential step in the process God is using to convert—to transform—us into His eternal children.

He wants children just like Him. Tested, pure, precious character is the possession we can take with us into eternity.

Examples of godly character in the Bible

The Bible has many examples of character, including Joseph, Paul and Timothy.

Joseph, a single man tempted by his boss's wife, had the godly character to flee the temptation, in spite of the heavy price he would pay. He

would be unjustly imprisoned for refusing to "sin against God" (Genesis 39:9; see more about Joseph's growth in character in our article "[Joseph in the Old Testament](#)").

Paul sought to imitate Jesus Christ, and so he developed exemplary Christian character (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Even before his conversion, he was a zealous man, but after meeting Christ on the road to Damascus, his zeal was properly focused. He was willing to endure any hardship and persevere through any persecution to do God's will.

Paul wrote many instructions about how Christians can think, act and become like Christ. He lived what he taught. His example of Christian character was an open book to the congregations he visited—and to us through his letters and the book of Acts.

Paul called his assistant Timothy a man of "proven character" (Philippians 2:22). We're told the following about Timothy's character:

- He lived the truths he had been taught and earned a good reputation (Acts 16:2).
- He was "like-minded" with Paul (and Christ). Paul knew Timothy would "sincerely care for" the

Philippians, seeking the things of Christ, not his own things (Philippians 2:20-21).

- Paul told Timothy, "But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance." Timothy had supported Paul in his persecutions and afflictions (2 Timothy 3:10-11).

How to develop Christian character

How can we grow in Christian character? Here are five steps:

- **Set the right goal: to become like Jesus Christ.**

John tells us to

"walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6).

This requires studying Jesus' example and following it. (See our series "[Walk as He Walked](#).")

Paul explained the goal—what the Church and the members should achieve: "Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

This is a very high goal!

- **Learn God's definition of right and wrong.** Learn what pleases God and what He hates. (Study this in our articles "[The 10 Commandments for Today](#)" and "[How to Please God](#).")
- **Commit to doing what is right and pleasing to God.** See our blog post "[How to Surrender to God](#)."
- **Do what is right and resist what is wrong.** Humanly, we can produce some great feats of willpower, and we can structure our lives to avoid many temptations. But to truly develop the mind and consistent character of Christ, we need something more.
- **Use the power of the Holy Spirit.** God offers His Spirit and supernatural power to transform us from the inside. He calls it becoming a new man ([Ephesians 4:22-24](#)). Study further about this vital step in our article "[How Do You Know You Have the Holy Spirit?](#)" and our booklet [Change Your Life](#). Win the war. Become an overcomer. Develop Christian character.

—Mike Bennett

The Significance of Pentecost and of Joel

Some of the travelers marveled at what they heard, and others were confused. Many in the crowd had come from distant corners of the Roman world and even from beyond Roman borders. All of them, however, heard the disciples of Jesus speak in their own dialects (Acts 2:7-8).

Some asked what this extraordinary moment meant. Others speculated that the disciples were all drunk (verses 12-13).

Peter then spoke, launching into his well-known sermon about the significance of Pentecost and these events as a fulfillment of prophecy.

What exactly did Peter's sermon reveal about the significance of Pentecost and its fulfillment of prophecy?

Pentecost and the book of Joel

Peter's sermon takes up much of Acts 2. In his message, he cites three passages of Scripture, the first being from the prophetic book of Joel. This passage hints at a significance of Pentecost not always understood.

The context of the prophecy in Joel that Peter quoted is "the great and awesome day of the LORD" (Joel 2:31). Other translations refer to it as "the great and terrible day" or "the great and dreadful day."

That's because this day is a time of both judgment and deliverance—judgment for those who oppose Christ at His return, and deliverance for those who look for "the coming of the day of God" (2 Peter 3:12).

The Day of the Lord is ushered in by dramatic and horrific events, including signs in the heavens (Joel 2:30; Revelation 8:12). This important time occurs when Christ returns to end the human misrule on this planet. (To learn more, see our article "[What Is the Day of the Lord?](#)").

But how could the events of Pentecost, just weeks after the crucifixion of Christ, fulfill the prophecies of Joel? Why did Peter quote this prophecy? Did he get it wrong?

Filled with the Holy Spirit

No, Peter did not get it wrong. His message was inspired by the events of that morning. The disciples had all gathered "with one accord in one place" (Acts 2:1). They had remained in Jerusalem, obeying the command of Jesus to "tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5).

And that is precisely what happened. After hearing the sound of a strong wind, and after seeing "tongues, as of fire" upon each of them, they were filled with God's Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2-3).



ance of nd the Book

Pentecost is most often associated with the beginning of the Church.

- Can we learn more about the significance of Pentecost in the book of Joel?

It was this power from God that enabled the disciples to be heard in the different languages of the known world. Those visiting Jerusalem for Pentecost could understand the apostle's words in their own languages.

God inspired Peter to make the connection to the wonderful passage in Joel that described when God would "pour out" His Spirit (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28).

Peter, like many first-century Christians, may well have thought the latter days had come upon humans, but he was not wrong in citing Joel's prophecy. What happened that Pentecost morning was clearly evidence of a fulfillment.

Joel wrote about the Day of the Lord, though. How do we reconcile the apparent disparity between his words and Peter's interpretation?

Dual fulfillments of prophecy

Consider the fact that many biblical prophecies have dual fulfillments, and some have even more than two. This is particularly true with prophecies about Christ.

The Word became flesh (John 1:14) as Jesus 2,000 years ago, but Christ will also return at the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). Prophecies about Him often blend elements of both these events.

One such example is a prophecy Jesus quoted as He began His ministry. Jesus read all of Isaiah 61:1 and the first line of the next verse, but then stopped short.

The last line Jesus read is "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19). The next line in Isaiah's prophecy, which Jesus did not read, is "and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isaiah 61:2).

The line Jesus did not read clearly refers to His return at the end of the age. Christ thus indicated that this prophecy has two fulfillments.

Understanding Joel's prophecy

The first passage Peter quoted on that Pentecost morning twice uses the expression, "I will pour out My Spirit" (Acts 2:17-18; Joel 2:28-29).

In the first instance this statement refers to "all flesh," or all people.

This is a significant change.

Prior to this time, God's Holy Spirit was not available to most people—not even most of the nation of Israel. There were, however, exceptions. God did give His Spirit to some kings, a few prominent leaders, and the true prophets of God (1 Samuel 16:12-13; Numbers 11:24-25; Jeremiah 1:9).

It seems that few other people, even among the chosen nation of Israel, had received the Holy Spirit. It is this understanding that makes the words *all flesh* in Joel so stunning.

As explained in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, "Joel went on to point out that what the Lord intended is that his Holy Spirit would be poured out, not on selected individuals for a particular task, but on all believers" (Vol. 7, p. 255).

In the second instance, "I will pour out My Spirit" is applied to God's "menservants" and "maidservants." This emphasizes the idea that God will give His Spirit not only to kings, prophets and prominent leaders, but to all of those whom God will call to Himself (John 6:44; Acts 2:39).

The significance of Pentecost for the early Church

The other two prophecies Peter quoted in his Pentecost sermon were about Christ—His resurrection (Acts 2:25-28; Psalm 16:8-11) and His enthronement (Acts 2:34-35; Psalm 110:1).

It is because of His death and resurrection that believers can receive God's Holy Spirit. The night before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples that they would not receive the Holy Spirit until He had gone away. He had to die and be raised first.

So Peter's message moved from the explanation of the events of that morning, when the disciples had received the Holy Spirit, to the death and resurrection of Christ. Receiving the Holy Spirit was possible only because of Christ's death and resurrection.

The climactic moment at the end of the sermon summed up the choice before them. They had to repent and "be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38) before they could receive God's Spirit. The same is true today.

As a result of this sermon, many who were in Jerusalem for the holy day did repent and receive God's Spirit. In one day "about three thousand souls were added" (verse 41). It was an impressive beginning for the fledgling Church.

But, as significant as it was, that day did not fulfill the end-time aspect of Joel's prophecy. What it did do was inaugurate the next stage in God's plan.

Firstfruits and Pentecost

Pentecost is the Greek name for the holy day also known as the Feast of Weeks. (The Greek word *pentēkostē* means "fiftieth.") Firstfruits are at the core of the meaning of this holy day, and this concept helps us understand the dual fulfillment of the passage in Joel.

The firstfruits of the barley harvest were offered 50 days, or seven weeks, before Pentecost (Leviticus 23:9-11, 15-16). And Pentecost itself was the day when the firstfruits of the wheat harvest were offered (*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 4, p. 692).

Paul identified Christ as the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20), corresponding to the offering made 50 days before Pentecost. In other passages, Paul identified a Christian named Epaphroditus as "the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ" (Romans 16:5). Christians are a kind of firstfruits (James 1:18).

Paul also wrote of Christians as those "who have the firstfruits of the Spirit" (Romans 8:23). In this passage he connects firstfruits with having the Holy Spirit.

The implication of the term *firstfruits* is that the harvest is not yet complete. The fact that they are first means more will come later.

What happened on that Pentecost when 3,000 disciples were added to the Church—and what has happened since—points to an even greater harvest yet to come.

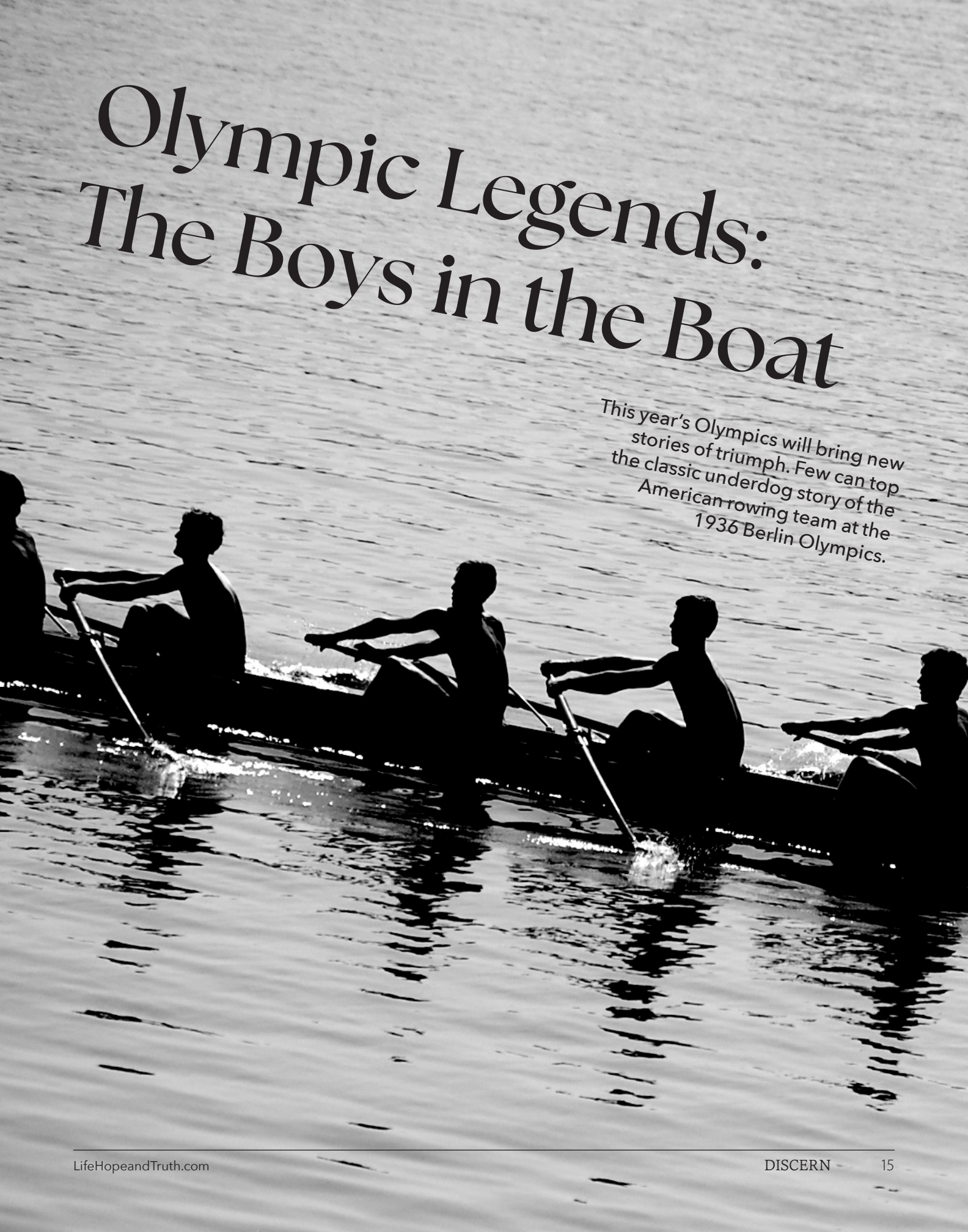
The future significance of Pentecost

That Pentecost of Acts 2 was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. God did pour out His Spirit in a way that He had not done before. But the day when "all flesh" will have the chance to receive His Spirit has not yet occurred. That much larger harvest is foreshadowed by the festivals that come later in the year. (To learn more, read about the "[Feast of Tabernacles](#)" and "[The Last Great Day](#).")

Until then, Christians can take comfort in knowing that the same God who fulfilled Joel's prophecy in the days of the early Church will fulfill that prophecy in an even grander way in the future.

May God speed that day!

—Bill Palmer



Olympic Legends: The Boys in the Boat

This year's Olympics will bring new stories of triumph. Few can top the classic underdog story of the American rowing team at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

In the late spring of 2007, author Daniel James Brown climbed the split-rail fence separating his pasture from the adjoining property. His 93-year-old neighbor Joe was dying.

Joe Rantz was one of only two living members of the nine-man crew that shocked the rowing world in the early to mid-1930s—especially at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

The Husky Clipper and its crew

Brown’s multiple discussions with Joe Rantz and his daughter birthed one of the most captivating books I’ve ever read, and reread. His research also included interviews with family members of the crew, access to personal diaries, trips to Germany to see the Olympic race course, access to video archives of the 1936 Olympics and much more.

The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics was published in 2013. The PBS *American Experience* series aired a documentary *The Boys of ’36* in 2016. A movie version of the story was released on Dec. 25, 2023.

The magnificent 62-foot *Husky Clipper* still turns heads when viewed in the Conibear Shellhouse dining hall on the Seattle campus of the University of Washington. Students smiled knowingly as they walked past my wife and me on our 2018 visit.

Its crew members are all gone now, but if only the *Husky Clipper* could talk . . .

An adjacent study and lounge houses memorabilia, including gold medals. The medals are not just Olympic, but also from the Poughkeepsie (New York) National Collegiate Championships (four years’ worth—1934, 1935, 1936, 1937).

When rowing together, three of the men in the legendary Olympic crew (Joe Rantz, Roger Morris and George “Shorty” Hunt) *never lost a competitive race*. One writer estimated that each pulled nearly 470,000 strokes of his oar in training over a four-year span.

What lessons might there be for us in such an inspiring epic of human striving for physical excellence?

A family goal

When Brown asked Joe Rantz for his permission to write the boys’ story, the aged oarsman agreed to further interviews, plus his full help and cooperation, with one stipulation: “*It has to be about the boat.*”

At first Brown was puzzled—but understanding came. Joe didn’t want it to be just about him.

In striving for a common goal, those nine remarkable young men were bound together in a tight family-type relationship.

Isn’t that at the heart and core of God’s plan for His children? Three times in a four-verse span the author of Hebrews refers to Christians as “brethren” or “children” (Hebrews 2:10-13).

One astonishing statement says it all: “For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason *He is not ashamed to call them brethren*” (verse 11, emphasis added throughout).

Christians are called to be God’s sons and daughters—to be brought into His glorified family as Christ’s co-heirs (Romans 8:14-18; 2 Corinthians 6:18).

The bond those nine young men built lasted their lifetimes. Even more inspiring is the purpose of God’s plan for them and all humanity—a family bond for eternity!

Nothing worth having comes easily

Brown’s explanation of the physical demands involved in competitive rowing (including oxygen deprivation and lactic acid buildup) is powerful:

“The common denominator in all these conditions—whether in the lungs, the muscles, or the bones—is overwhelming pain . . . It’s not a question of whether you will hurt, or of how much you will hurt; it’s a question of what you will do, and how well you will do it, while pain has her wanton way with you” (p. 40).

Paul’s words to Timothy leap to mind: “You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ . . . If anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules” (2 Timothy 2:3, 5).

Christ taught that the path to God’s family is not the easy one. Do we have the determination needed to obey God in a world obstinately headed in the opposite direction?

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us,” wrote Paul (Romans 8:18).

Being part of something larger than ourselves

In 1933, the University of Washington’s freshman crew coach addressed aspiring crew members. Tom Bolles “sometimes spoke of life-transforming experiences. He

held out the prospect of becoming part of something larger than themselves . . . [experiencing] moments they would remember, cherish and recount to their grandchildren when they were old men. Moments, even, that would bring them nearer to God” (p. 41).

His speech is reminiscent of what Paul told the Christians in Ephesus—that they were part of a building—a *holy temple*—constructed on the foundation of apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Is any physical cause bigger than that?

Humility is a must

What’s the first scripture that leaps to your mind when you think of God’s calling? How about this one:

“For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world . . . the weak things of the world . . . the things which are despised God has chosen” (1 Corinthians 1:26-28).

His point? To criticize, demoralize or shame His chosen? *Just the opposite*. God’s choice “shames” the *world’s hubris-filled powerful* by demonstrating *His* power in humble, responsive children. His power enhances their God-given gifts!

The purpose? “That no flesh should glory in His presence” (verse 29).

Brown wrote this about Joe’s team: “The challenges they had faced together had taught them humility—the need to subsume their individual egos for the sake of the boat as a whole—and humility was the common gateway through which they were able now to come together and begin to do what they had not been able to do before” (p. 241).

The enemy doesn’t fight fair

The University of Washington rowing team easily won their preliminary heat for the 2,000-meter race, setting a new world best time of 6 minutes, 0.8 seconds. By Olympic tradition, they should have been awarded the favored lane for the final event.

They weren’t. Berlin’s Olympic officials put the American team *in the worst lane*. They would battle wind and choppy water for nearly 1,500 of the 2,000 meters!

“[It] was the opposite of the usual procedure, in which the fastest qualifiers earned the favored lanes . . . The best lanes were the protected ones closest to shore: lanes one,

two and three; the least desirable were lanes five and six . . . [The assignment of lanes] gave the protected lanes to the host country and her closest ally, the worst lanes to her prospective enemies. It was deeply suspicious” (p. 334).

Lane one, Germany; lane two, Italy; lane six, U.S.A.

Does any of this sound like the tactics of God’s archenemy, who tries to twist and distort God’s words for his purposes (Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 3:4, 5)?

The “boys in the boat” won anyway!

With God’s help, *so can we*.

We must do the impossible

In the final torturous sprint to the wire, the American team hit an estimated stroke rate of 44 beats per minute, winning by six-tenths of a second over Italy. Third-place Germany was four-tenths of a second behind Italy. *All three boats crossed the finish line within the space of one second*.

The American crew had never rowed that fast, that smoothly, *ever*. But to win the race required doing what seemed impossible.

Has such a thing ever been required of God’s servants? It most certainly has. We could almost say it’s “par for the course!”

What of the three young men thrown into the fiery furnace? The Israelites walking *through* the Red Sea? Peter stepping out to walk on water?

With our spiritual challenges, God makes the impossible possible (Matthew 19:26). Are we all in?

Fulfilling God’s purpose for us makes us whole

Joe Rantz was deeply moved by their Olympic victory. He had been abandoned by his family and had felt like an outsider, a loner. “Rowing crew” gave him a purpose, a family and earthly honors, transforming his life. *He felt whole—restored*. Yet it was all physical.

On a deeper level, *humanity is missing something crucial*.

Since the Garden of Eden, we have been cut off from the tree of life.

But God’s plan for humanity reverses that:

“Blessed are those who do His commandments, that *they may have the right to the tree of life*” (Revelation 22:14).

God will restore, refresh and make us truly whole as His beloved children. That’s our awesome future!

—Doug Johnson

Should We Worry About Growing World Debt?

World debt reached a record-breaking \$313 trillion in 2023. Should we be worried? And what does the Bible say about such debt?



The modern world operates on debt.

Debt is so much a part of our modern lives that it's hard to imagine today's civilization without it. And there's no doubt that capitalism, the predominant economic model of the Western world for hundreds of years, could not exist without debt.

How much debt is sustainable? [Reuters](#) reported that world debt reached \$313 trillion in 2023. This record-high figure includes government, business and household debt combined—and it's growing.

Staggering growth of world debt

The [Brookings Institution](#) asserts that “a new wave of debt accumulation” worldwide began in 2010. This coincided with ongoing efforts to restore balance to the economies devastated by the Great Recession (2007-2009).

Adding to that, the pandemic of 2020 resulted in world debt surging even more. That year, according to the Brookings Institution, “total global debt rose by 30 percentage points of GDP, to 263 percent of GDP—the largest single-year increase since at least 1970.”

This figure is an important one to understand. The combined debt of governments, businesses and individuals is between two and three times what the entire world produces in a year.

Unfortunately, economists cannot agree even on what level of debt is “responsible” and what level isn't. The [Carnegie](#)

[Endowment for International Peace](#) points out that “few economists have a clear understanding of why too much debt is a bad thing, let alone how much debt is too much.”

Clearly, our civilization has grown comfortable with huge amounts of debt.

The consequences of world debt

High levels of public debt already affect an enormous number of people. As determined by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development ([UNCTAD](#)), right now “3.3 billion people live in countries that spend more on interest payments than on education or health.”

In other words, governments for approximately 40 percent of the world's population have trapped themselves in endless cycles of debt service. These nations are so burdened by debt that they cannot serve their citizens well.

That is bad enough by itself, but history is replete with far more devastating consequences. Economists Nouriel Roubini and Stephen Mihm explain that unsustainable debt is often the root of economic crises that “have toppled governments and bankrupted nations.” These crises “have driven countries to wage retaliatory trade battles. Crises have even paved the way for wars, much as the Great Depression helped set the stage for World War II” (*Crisis Economics: A Crash Course in the Future of Finance*, 2010, p. 15).

National governments grappling with their own economic problems often tend to work against the interests of other nations that are struggling with their own problems.

An [Investopedia](#) article explains why and how this occurred: “The Great Depression motivated individual nations to adopt more beggar-thy-neighbor trade policies to protect domestic industries from foreign competition.” It was every country for itself.

Debt-based crises lead nations to pursue selfish policies, just as personal debt crises can lead individuals to engage in foolish behavior.

How did we get here?

Although global debt has remained on a generally upward trajectory for decades, the greatest surge has come since the Great Recession. Observers aren't in agreement



about the dynamics of the financial crisis that resulted in that recession.

In *Crisis Economics*, Roubini and Mihm point out that some economists maintain the crisis was a “black swan event,” meaning that it was “highly improbable and impossible to predict.” Roubini and Mihm go on to say, however, that “financial crises generally follow the same script over and over again” (p. 16).

“Most crises begin with a bubble,” they explain, “in which the price of a particular asset rises far above its underlying fundamental value. This kind of bubble often goes hand in hand with an excessive accumulation of debt, as investors borrow money to buy into the boom” (p. 17).

That has been clearly true of recent crises. The prices of homes in the United States, as well as in other countries, rose astronomically in the years leading up to the crash in prices. On top of that, financial institutions did a brisk business in originating and then selling loans, another asset in a bubble.

Moral hazard

When the house of cards finally collapsed, the world watched in disbelief. Yet what had occurred was the predictable result of excessive greed. It was also a by-product of what economists call “moral hazard.”

This term, according to Roubini and Mihm, refers to a person’s “willingness to take risks—particularly excessive risks—that he would normally avoid, simply because he knows someone else will shoulder whatever negative consequences follow” (p. 68).

With easy access to financing and a belief that home prices could only rise, many people who weren’t really qualified to buy jumped into the market. Real estate agents, whose commissions are based on sales rather than the creditworthiness of their clients, sold houses their clients could not afford.

Even the mortgage brokers who originated the loans did not look too closely at borrowers. Their pay is based on origination fees taken up front. Whether the borrower ultimately defaulted would not affect their pay, and that fact may have affected their decisions.

Sadly, the government bailouts of “too big to fail” institutions only compounded the problem of moral hazard for the future. Knowing that big government is all too ready to step in and save them, these corporations have little incentive to change their behavior.

What does the Bible say about debt?

Written over the course of centuries by people living in thoroughly different cultures, the Bible does not directly discuss what we call world debt. However, there are important principles we can glean from Scripture.

The first concept we should notice is that the Bible portrays debt as a kind of servitude: “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender” (Proverbs 22:7). This verse, though directed at the individual, can be applied on a national level.

The book of Deuteronomy does just that. In a passage listing blessings Israel would receive for obedience,



God tells His chosen people that He would so bless the work of their hands that the nation would “lend to many nations, but . . . not borrow” (Deuteronomy 28:12).

In that same chapter, God also lists the curses that would come upon Israel for disobedience. Included among these curses is the presence of foreigners who would “rise higher and higher” (verse 43). Those aliens would lend to the people of Israel.

In both the blessings and the curses passages, national indebtedness implies withheld blessings as a result of disobedience.

Lending from a biblical perspective

Quite a few biblical passages encourage lending to poorer members of the community, but without charging interest: “If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. Take no usury or interest from him; but fear your God, that your brother may live with you. You shall not lend him your money for usury, nor lend him your food at a profit” (Leviticus 25:35-37).

God prohibited usury, which is charging interest to make a profit. In fact, God even prohibited His people from other heartless practices, such as taking a “neighbor’s garment as a pledge” and keeping it overnight (Exodus 22:26).

This “pledge,” as it is called, was a type of collateral. Because Israelites often used their outer garments as blankets, keeping it overnight would have been cruel. The point is, those who were well-off were to consider the needs of their neighbors.

The concern for one’s neighbor was to be so strong that the more affluent members of the community would lend without expecting to be paid back. The book of Proverbs puts this willingness into perspective: “He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, and He will pay back what he has given” (Proverbs 19:17).

Jesus took this principle a step further, saying, “Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away” (Matthew 5:42).

This statement comes on the heels of instructions dealing with the demands of the occupying Roman army (verse 41) and just before Christ’s command for believers to “love your enemies” (verse 44). In the

context, the instruction to give in verse 42 may well apply to one’s enemies.

Of course, we should avoid unwise lending or giving that would negatively impact our families or the people we are lending or giving to.

A Christian perspective of world debt

The greed and moral hazard issues that brought our civilization ballooning world debt are at odds with the biblical attitude toward indebtedness. Scripture counsels us to avoid borrowing when possible; in contrast, many people today see debt as a get-rich-quick tool.

There seems to be no shame among many of those who brought our financial system to the brink of collapse a few years ago. Regardless of whatever structural changes governments of the world made after the Great Recession, the underlying problem of character has not been addressed.

The world’s mushrooming debt is a symptom of ongoing greed and decadence. Our civilization, living in opposition to God, is crumbling. This should not be a surprise to Christians, who are well aware that the Bible foretells of calamitous times just before the return of Christ.

We cannot know the precise day and hour when the end will come, but we can take note of the signs all around us. The staggering growth of world debt is just one indicator, but it is there to be noticed by anyone who will pay attention.

Should Christians be worried? No. Prepared? Yes!

We do not have the power to transform a broken system, but we can take control of our own finances. We can prepare by living according to biblical standards.

And we need not worry.

Jesus reassured believers, telling them four times in the Sermon on the Mount not to worry about material things (Matthew 6:25, 28, 31, 34). Instead, He told them to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (verse 33). That’s good advice for all of us as we watch world events.

Study further about the world economy in Bible prophecy in our articles “[What Is the Future of the World Economy?](#)” and “[Inflation, Economic Instability and Bible Prophecy.](#)” Learn more about biblical personal finances in our online section “[Foundational Principles for Managing Family Finances.](#)”

—Bill Palmer



Q: What exactly do we do to celebrate Pentecost? I know it represents God's third step in His plan for salvation, the founding of the New Testament Church/firstfruits, the gift of tongues, and the giving of the Holy Spirit, at least that's what I understand so far. But how do we celebrate it in the modern age? Is it just another time for rest? Can we celebrate it alone, or is a group necessary?

A: Since Pentecost is an annual Sabbath, or holy day, members of the Church of God, a Worldwide Association (the sponsor of the Life, Hope & Truth website) observe it in a way similar to the weekly Sabbath (see "[How to Keep the Sabbath Holy](#)"). We do not work, and we attend a church service that is dedicated to understanding the meaning and importance of this festival of God in His master plan for humanity. On the annual Sabbaths, we also bring an offering, following the instruction of Deuteronomy 16:16.

As you read through Leviticus 23, you will notice that there are two requirements common to all of God's annual holy days: We are to rest (abstain from our regular work), and we are to assemble for a holy convocation (have a church service). Some of the festivals have other specific instructions—for instance, fasting on the Day of Atonement and eating unleavened bread during the Days of Unleavened Bread—but Pentecost does not.

We observe this day in honor of God's giving the Holy Spirit and founding the Church of God. You can view a short summary about the meaning of Pentecost and the other six festivals by watching our video series "[Feasts of the Lord](#)."

The Church of God, a Worldwide Association, does have some Church members who live very far from a local congregation and cannot attend regularly. Because of that, a number of our congregations webcast live Sabbath and holy day services on our [cogwa.tv](#) site.

We observe the annual festivals at the times established by God using the Hebrew calendar. In 2024

Pentecost is on June 16. You can read about Pentecost (also known as the Feast of Weeks) in Leviticus 23:15-22 and in our article "[Pentecost: God Gives the Holy Spirit](#)."

Q: I have lost all faith in the church because of prejudice and hypocrisy. Christians speak the word, teach the word, but don't know how to live the word. It's really heartbreaking and sad.

A: You are not alone in losing faith in church. A Sept. 13, 2022, [Pew Research study](#) about the future of religion in America concluded, "Since the 1990s, large numbers of Americans have left Christianity to join the growing ranks of U.S. adults who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or 'nothing in particular.'"

The study also forecast that the percentage of Americans who identify as Christians would fall below 50 percent if current trends continue. (See "[Why the Decline of Christianity?](#)")

However, Jesus Christ said that He would build His Church "and the gates of Hades [the grave] shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). In other words, the Church Christ established has existed somewhere on earth since Christ's day, and its members continue to practice true Christianity as Jesus taught it.

You can have faith that such a church does exist at this time. But most churches today do not teach Christianity as Christ taught it, and thus do not recognize it or practice it.

The best description of Christianity in action is found in what is referred to as the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew 5-7, where Jesus expounded on how to live according to the Word of God. If you would like to read a detailed explanation of Christ's teachings on this subject, please download our free booklet [The Sermon on the Mount](#).

Within the Sermon on the Mount are the keys to overcoming prejudice and hypocrisy, ending war and violence, reconciling relationships, experiencing true happiness and developing a close relationship with our Creator.

If you have questions, submit them at
LifeHopeandTruth.com/ask-a-question/

Also, our article [“How to Spot a Counterfeit Church”](#) and our booklet *Where Is the Church Jesus Built?* can help you identify the Church Jesus founded.

Q: You have some things right and some things wrong [in the article [“Will There Be a Secret Rapture?”](#)]. The word *rapture* is not in the Bible, but the meaning is from the Greek word *harpazo*, meaning snatched away. I also don't believe it will be a secret. People will see the Lord return in power and glory to take His Bride, the Church, and believers to heaven for the great wedding banquet. See Revelation 19. Then Jesus will return with all His saints riding on a white horse. There are two separate second comings. One is in the clouds; the other is a touchdown on the Mount of Olives. Don't forget to include 1 Corinthians 15.

A: The return of Jesus Christ and the events surrounding it are indeed exciting. We agree that Christ's return will not be secret. We also agree that many exciting things will occur around the time of Christ's return, including the resurrection of the saints. But we don't see anything in the Bible to say there will be two different returns.

In Zechariah 14, Matthew 24 and other references, the Bible teaches that Christ will return to the earth to establish the Kingdom of God simultaneously with the resurrection of the saints (1 Corinthians 15:52; Revelation 11:15; Daniel 7:13-14, 27). Those resurrected saints will be joined by the saints still living and will meet Christ in the air as He returns to the earth. The Bible further shows that the place where God will protect His people will be on the earth during the Great Tribulation (Revelation 12:13-17; see our article [“Place of Safety”](#)).

The Greek word translated “shall be caught up” is *harpazo*, and as our article [“Will There Be a Secret Rapture?”](#) notes, it means “‘to catch, pull, or take by force’ (*Louw and Nida Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*). This is a strong word in the Greek, emphasizing that the action will be sudden and forceful. It conveys the forceful power of God by which He will resurrect those who had died.

“In the Vulgate (Latin) Bible the phrase ‘shall be caught up’ is translated *rapere*, from which the word *rapture* is derived.”

We do not see any conflict between 1 Corinthians 15 and Revelation 19. When Christ returns, He will gather His faithful people in the clouds to meet Him, and then He will descend with them to the Mount of Olives to commence the rule of the Kingdom of God on earth.

If you would like to study these things further, see our articles:

- [“Did Jesus Teach the Rapture?”](#)
 - [“When Will Jesus Return?”](#)
 - [“Marriage Supper of the Lamb.”](#)
-

Q: How do we know the difference between a false and a true prophet?

A: The Bible shows that God spoke through the prophets in the Old Testament and then later through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2) and the apostles in the New Testament. Christ specifically warned there would be false prophets who would try to deceive mankind in the end times (Matthew 24:24), so it is good that we develop the discernment needed to differentiate between true prophets of God and false prophets.

There are four basic tests we can use to prove whether someone is a true prophet—a prophet of God. We must ask:

- Does the conduct of the prophet reflect godly character?
- Do the predictions of the prophet come true?
- Are the words of the prophet consistent with Scripture?
- Is there spiritual benefit in the prophet's ministry?

Our article [“Prophets of the Bible”](#) gives a clear indication of the characteristics and purpose of the prophets (both past and future) who are spoken of in the Word of God. Also read [“False Prophets”](#) for an educational look at how to recognize false prophets and stay grounded in the truth of God.

What Can the Righteous Do as the Foundations of Society Are Destroyed?

As many of the foundations of society crumble, what can we do? How can we avoid being distracted by unsettling changes and instead focus on the future?

Change. It's a simple word—but it packs a punch. Depending on the issue, some argue for it. Others against. Some deny it's happening. Others celebrate it.

Change is inevitable. As we age and mature, so many things change—our bodies; our preferences in food, fashion and music; our *ideas* of family and community.

Sometimes change happens on a massive scale. Everything can seem to change overnight. The destruction of the Jewish temple in A.D. 70. The implosion of the Roman Empire. The fall of the Berlin Wall. These events altered traditions, norms, expectations and plans on a grand scale.

It can be unsettling or unnerving.

We are living in a period of vast and significant change. The upheaval and unrest across cultures can bring uncertainty and anxiety. How should Christians respond?

David's conundrum

Psalm 11 presents King David pondering this question.

After opening with a bold statement of faith, "In the LORD I put my trust" (Psalm 11:1), David then addresses those encouraging him to run, flee and hide.



“How can you say to my soul, ‘Flee as a bird to your mountain’? For look! The wicked bend their bow, they make ready their arrow on the string, that they may shoot secretly at the upright in heart” (verses 1-2).

David’s assessment is bleak. Unnamed enemies were secretly targeting and planning attacks on the upright.

Then David poses a gut-wrenching question. “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (verse 3).

Which foundations?

David was not referring to eternal truths, laws and commands or the unchanging character of God. Those foundations cannot fundamentally be moved, shaken or destroyed.

The way society values, approaches or even tolerates these foundations is a different story.

While Psalm 11 does not offer specifics, David was apparently considering the *foundations* of society—the communal bonds and practices that enable cohesiveness, a sense of connection and stability.

Every society or culture will have its own *foundations*. When those foundations weaken, shift or are destroyed, it presents a dilemma for citizens.

Several shared foundations are being rapidly eroded in our modern societies—especially in the West. Consider these:

- **Marriage and family:** For millennia, the family structure has been the bedrock of social order. Yet across cultures—especially in Western society—this foundation is shifting and being undermined.
- **Law and order:** Most functioning civilizations rely on an accepted protocol of law and order. Even if the official system is flawed—as is common in corrupt regimes—the general populace has a working understanding of how justice is administered. Across much of the West today, the national systems of law and order are being eroded.
- **Civility:** The cultural expectations of courtesy, respect for parents and the elderly, and deference to those in authority are quickly disappearing from society. Road rage and general vulgarity illustrate this decline.
- **Morality:** Many societies have a generally understood moral expectation of citizens. In practice, concepts such as honesty and integrity are being weakened and dismissed.

- **Traditional world order:** Many historical allegiances that offered a degree of world stability are shifting.

What can the righteous do?

If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?

This remains a relevant question for Christians in progress. Let’s examine four appropriate responses.

1. Stay close to God.

This should be a natural response for Christians.

However, chaotic, high-stress, disorienting times can shake this foundational relationship.

Physical senses can overwhelm spiritual perspective. The incident in 2 Kings 6:11-17 illustrates this. Elisha’s servant was overwhelmed by the physical army surrounding his village. In that tense moment, the servant needed and received a miraculous reminder of God’s presence.

The destruction of foundations creates a time of vulnerability. Christians may experience pressure and perceive a push to compromise or abandon the faith.

One key to successfully navigating monumental periods when foundations are crumbling is to strengthen our relationship with God.

This has always been true. Consider Esther’s response when the Jewish people faced annihilation. “Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise” (Esther 4:16).

Esther’s response to the destruction of foundations was to solidify her relationship with God. This is done through prayer, study, meditation, fasting and fellowship. For an in-depth exploration of these practical tools, download [*Five Tools for Spiritual Growth*](#).

2. Maintain righteousness.

What can the *righteous* do?

The question’s focus is on those David calls *the righteous*. Admittedly, Christians aren’t perfectly righteous, but our lifestyle and worldview should be aligned with God’s. Examine “[How to Be Righteous](#)” for more information.

By God’s grace and through faith, Christians in progress can be righteous. This requires an intentional submission of our thoughts, desires and actions to God’s will and direction.



Jesus exhorted His followers: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness”

(Matthew 6:33). The context addresses

worry about physical protection, food, clothing and shelter (verses 25-32).

Jesus directs Christians to remain in a state of ongoing growth—seeking God’s righteousness.

Satan, the adversary of those who would follow Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:8), will try to use chaos and confusion to disorient Christians, battering away at truth, conviction and faith.

In situations where cultural, social and political foundations are destroyed, it may be increasingly difficult to practice righteousness.

During such dark and foreboding times, the light of a Christian’s obedience to God will seem brighter and draw more attention. Such attention can be daunting.

Paul reminded Christians in Rome, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). *Foundations* may crumble around us, but Christians in progress should continue to pursue righteousness.

3. Strive to live peaceably with everyone.

When social or cultural foundations crack or crumble, humans often begin to accuse and attack others. Violence becomes common. Horrors such as the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s and ongoing violence in Myanmar offer a decidedly sobering glimpse of how quickly human society can deteriorate.

Paul, writing to the congregation living in Rome during the reign of Nero, reminded Christians to strive for peace. “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18).

The phrase *live peaceably* means to actively cultivate peace in an ongoing, continuous sense. We should proactively facilitate peace. Christians will nurture peace, tending and keeping it. We will strive to create an environment where peace thrives.

This admonition is repeated. “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God” (Hebrews 12:14-15).

Despite distressing injustice and evil in society, Christians should strive for peace. “Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers,

intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

4. Cling to the other Christians.

When social and cultural foundations are being eroded, Christians should deepen and strengthen relationships with other faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

One gift Jesus offers His followers is the safety and security of the Church of God (Matthew 16:18). For more information on the Church of God, see our booklet *Where Is the Church Jesus Built?*

The Church of God—described as the Body of Christ—is to be woven and knit together (Ephesians 4:16). This organized group of believers offers encouragement, support and community. When foundations are destroyed, Christians can benefit from the stability offered by a congregation (Hebrews 10:24-25).

As Christians in progress, we have a duty to enhance and increase godly fellowship. This includes approaching one another with humility, affection and generosity (Romans 12:10-13).

Foundations are crumbling

We live in a time when many societal foundations are being assaulted and, in some cases, destroyed. Times like these are precarious and can expose vulnerabilities for the people of God. *If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?*

David responded with some encouraging observations. “The LORD is in His holy temple, the LORD’s throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men” (Psalm 11:4).

Take courage, knowing that God remains faithful. Justice will come at the hand of God (verses 5-6).

David concludes with a vision of the future for those who faithfully endure unsettling times. “For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face” (verse 7, English Standard Version).

To read more about the incredible future offered to the human family, review “[The Purpose of Man.](#)”

As Christians in progress, let’s avoid being distracted by unsettling changes in society and culture. Instead, let’s use these four points to keep our focus on the wonderful future God promises.

—Jason Hyde

Wonders of GOD'S Creation



All the Better to See You With

Of all the land mammals on the American continents, nothing outruns the pronghorn. And even though the cheetah of the African savanna could beat it in a sprint, the pronghorn is better equipped to maintain its top speeds longer, thanks to shock-absorbing hooves, a light bone structure, hollow hair and a large windpipe, heart and lungs.

It takes baby pronghorns just 30 minutes to learn to walk. At four days old, they're faster than humans—and after just a week, they can outrun horses.

God gave pronghorns incredible vision, with long lashes that act like sun visors and big bulging eyes that can see for 320 degrees and can spot extremely small movements 3 miles away. It's hard to sneak up on a pronghorn—and once it spots you, nearly impossible to catch up to it!

Pictured: pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*)

Photo by James Capo

Text by James Capo and Jeremy Lallier

Walk as He Walked

How Did Jesus Pray?

Do you want to learn how to pray? Or to pray better? The Bible provides ample instruction. A great starting place is the example of Jesus Himself.

Shortly after identifying Himself as the Lord of the Sabbath, a major milestone occurred in Jesus' ministry: the appointment of the 12 apostles. This group would play a key role in providing leadership for His Church after His departure.

Consider *how* Jesus selected them.

"Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to *pray*, and continued all night in *prayer* to God" (Luke 6:12, emphasis added throughout).

Following this night of fervent prayer, Jesus came down and appointed 12 of His disciples to be apostles (verses 13-16).

Here's the point: *Jesus prayed.*

Many know that Jesus provided instruction on prayer, including a [model prayer](#) in Matthew 6:5-13. In addition to studying Jesus' formal teachings on prayer, we can learn much about prayer by also studying *His* prayer life.

How did Jesus pray? What practical lessons can we learn about prayer from His example?

Lessons on prayer from Jesus' example

Here are five lessons we can learn about prayer by examining Jesus' prayer life.

1. Jesus prayed before making important decisions.

We already saw that Jesus prayed for hours before choosing the men who would serve as apostles.

This was a significant decision. These men would form the founding nucleus of His Church, take His message far and wide, and be responsible for faithfully preserving His words for future generations.

To choose the apostles, He sought guidance and direction from the Father.

The lesson for us today is to take our needs—especially our need for wisdom when facing major decisions—to God in prayer. When we do that, we shouldn't just ask God to rubber-stamp a decision we've already made, but genuinely ask Him to show us *His will* (Matthew 6:10).

Prayers for wisdom should be combined with our due diligence in considering a decision from all angles. In fact, God sometimes reveals His will by making the best decision obvious to us as we research, ponder and evaluate it using the intellect He gave us.

For more on this, read "[Make God Your Personal Adviser.](#)"

2. Jesus primarily prayed in private.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that prayer should primarily be done in private (Matthew 6:6). Since prayer is one-on-one communication between us and God, praying just to seem religious to others defeats the intended purpose of prayer. Prayer is to build and strengthen our *personal relationship* with God the Father.

Jesus practiced what He preached and often withdrew from the disciples and crowds in order to pray privately. Though He sometimes offered short prayers in public, His substantial, personal and prolonged prayers occurred out of the public eye.

Scripture shows that Jesus often prayed on mountaintops or in deserted areas because those were secluded and quiet locations where He could pray without interruptions. Since He was often traveling, He didn't usually have access to a private room in a home. So He often prayed in various places of solitude in nature.

After He fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, "He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray" (Matthew 14:23). Luke adds that this wasn't an occasional occurrence, but that "He Himself *often* withdrew into the wilderness and prayed" (Luke 5:16). He also made use of the solitary time available in the



early morning hours to spend time in prayer with His Father (Mark 1:35).

Since these prayers were private, we don't know what He prayed. However, His intense prayer in John 17, on the night of His arrest and crucifixion, gives us some understanding. Studying this prayer provides insight into Jesus' mind and how He approached prayer to His Father.

To learn more, read "[Private Worship Toward God.](#)"

3. Jesus prayed to the Father.

Though we've alluded to it in the previous points, it's important to note that Jesus *always* addressed His prayers to the Father. He modeled precisely what He taught—"pray to your Father who is in the secret place" (Matthew 6:6, see also verse 9).

Jesus never prayed to any deceased saint. Instead, Jesus taught us to pray to the Father in His name.

He said, "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:13-14; see also 16:23-24).

Christians today follow His example and instruction by praying to the Father in the name of Christ. Jesus Christ serves as the High Priest, Mediator and Advocate between us and the Father (Romans 8:34; 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1).

4. Jesus spent much of His prayer time thanking the Father.

Though Jesus made requests when He prayed, His prayers weren't just a long list of His wants and needs.

He made it a habit to express thankfulness consistently.

Before miraculously feeding the 5,000, Jesus paused to *thank* the Father (John 6:11).

At Lazarus' resurrection, Jesus *thanked* the Father (John 11:41-42).

After hearing that His disciples were growing and being used by God, Jesus *thanked* the Father for calling and working with these men (Luke 10:21).

Jesus' example is why many Christians pause to offer a short prayer of thanksgiving before a meal. But beyond short prayers over meals, we should spend a portion of our private prayers giving thanks

to God, not just for general things, but also for His specific blessings.

If you'd like more ideas about how and what to thank God for, consider doing a word study of the words *thanks* and *thanksgiving* in the book of Psalms. You may also find our article on "[Thanksgiving Prayer](#)" helpful.

5. Jesus prayed for others.

Jesus didn't center His prayers solely on Himself. He also frequently prayed for others. He truly cared for people and was driven by outgoing concern for them.

For example, on the night of His final Passover, Jesus warned Peter that he would deny Him. Even though Jesus knew this painful denial was coming, He gave a small peek into something that occurred in the spirit realm:

"Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). Satan intended to lead Peter down a dark path that would be spiritually irreversible.

However, Jesus followed that with this comment about His private prayers: "But I have *prayed for you*, that your faith should not fail" (verse 32).

We don't know the details of Jesus' prayers for Peter, but we do know that the Father answered those prayers. Even though Peter did make some terrible mistakes that night, denying Jesus three times, he caught himself and repented.

We are also given glimpses into Jesus' prayers for others in His prayer in John 17. He prayed not only for His disciples at that time (verse 9), but also for all those who would be added to His Church later (verse 20). So, if you are a true disciple, you can know and be assured that Christ prayed for *you*.

If we're striving to pray as Jesus prayed, we will regularly offer [intercessory prayers](#) for the needs and benefits of others.

Pray as Jesus prayed

The theme of this "Walk as He Walked" series is the necessity of using Christ's life as the model for our own lives. Prayer is an essential element in developing a relationship with the Father. Praying as Jesus prayed is a critical piece as we endeavor to . . .

Walk as He walked.

—Erik Jones

Rivers at the Ends of the Earth

Brownish-green water flowed out of Lake Tana into an exotic, enigmatic river. This water was starting a 900-mile journey from central Ethiopia, south, west, then north to Sudan where it would join another river flowing north out of Lake Victoria.

We were looking at the headwaters of the Blue Nile!

Exploring the upper reaches of the Nile

The Blue Nile, so named because of its dark muddy color, joins the White Nile, named for the clay sediment that lightens its color, in Khartoum to create the great Nile, which flows into the Mediterranean Sea through the Nile Delta in Egypt.

The passage from Lake Tana to the sea runs some 3,100 miles. The White Nile is longer, but its blue sister provides 80 percent of the water.

Because of the deep, jagged gorges through which it flows, the river was not completely mapped until the 1930s. The first people to navigate the river in its entirety did so in 2004. Until very recently, the Blue Nile was mysterious.

As we took off from the airport at Bahir Dar, we were impressed by the rugged surrounding mountains and the gorge through which the dark river flowed.

The Blue and White Niles and the future

The Bible references the two Niles. They were known to exist, though probably not their sources, when the prophet Zephaniah was active in the 600s B.C. Zephaniah 3:10 reads, “From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, the daughter of My dispersed ones, shall bring My offering.”

The word *Ethiopia* is somewhat misleading. The Hebrew word is *Cush*, which covered an area larger than Ethiopia does today. Both tributaries of the Nile would have been in the land of Cush, which represented the end of the known world to the south of Israel.

The context of the verse is an Israelite diaspora, surviving captives of the conquest of their nation, being delivered from slavery and returning from the edges of the known world.

This happened in the past, when Jewish captives were allowed to return to Jerusalem in the 530s B.C. But the context here is “the day of the LORD” (Zephaniah 1:7).

These are therefore events yet future, when punishment from God will fall on all the disobedient throughout the earth, but particularly on nations that should have known better.

When peoples will finally repent, God will have mercy on them and bring them home where they will live under the wonderful Kingdom of God (Isaiah 11:1-10).

Everyone, from the extremities of the earth, will go home to peace and safety, even from the lands of the White and Blue Niles.

Joel Meeker




How can you separate the facts from the fallacies about the spirit world?



This booklet explores what the Creator God reveals about an unseen world that has a powerful impact on our lives.

Download your free copy from the Learning Center on LifeHopeandTruth.com