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THE

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REAL TRUTH

A MAGAZINE RESTORING PLAIN UNDERSTANDING



Why Do
Migrants
**CHOOSE
AMERICA?**



U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy testifies about youth mental health before the Senate Finance Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. (Feb. 8, 2022).

MANDAL NGAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Loneliness Epidemic

The U.S. Surgeon General warned that chronic loneliness is as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and is costing the nation billions.

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Front Cover: A Colombian immigrant waits to be processed by Border Patrol agents outside an encampment near the U.S.-Mexico border fence in El Paso, Texas (May 12, 2023).

JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES

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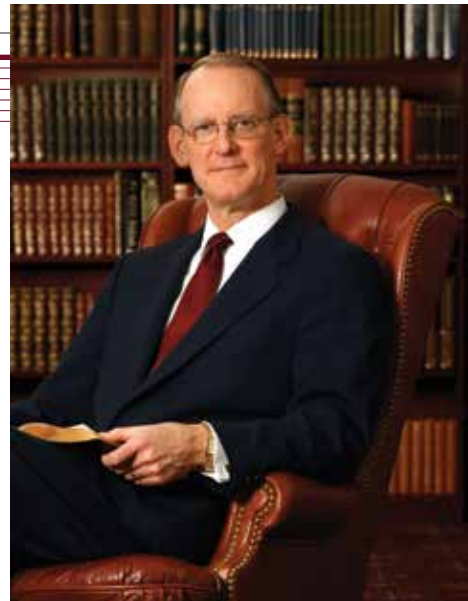
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PERSONAL FROM

David C. Fack



12 Rules for Studying the Bible (Part 1)

HOW CAN the Bible be the world's all-time bestseller, yet remain the most misunderstood book ever? Because people so often refuse to believe that it means what it says, it is twisted, maligned and misrepresented.

Most who study the Bible benefit little—or not at all. They become confused, discouraged and give up, saying “I just can’t understand” what it means. You can be an exception. There are 12 fundamental rules that govern proper Bible study. But most ignore, misunderstand or know nothing of them. Yet when properly applied, these basic rules unlock treasures of doctrine, prophecy, instruction, knowledge—and more—contained in God’s Word. If your mind is open to the truth, you can apply them.

Modern Christendom twists, perverts and ignores the many plain truths of the Bible. Over the centuries, it has replaced every true doctrine with a cheap counterfeit. This has been possible because certain less easy-to-understand passages of Scripture can be easily misrepresented—made to say something they do not. It is these verses that

invariably become the vehicle by which a false doctrine can be introduced—with almost no one able to recognize it all may have begun with a single wrong scriptural premise.

Most students of Scripture do not build doctrinal understanding by beginning with the clearest verses on a subject. Rather, they enter God’s Word with preconceived ideas and search for passages that *appear* to support what they have *assumed* it teaches. This makes them candidates for confusion and deception.

The apostle Peter stated that the apostle “Paul [wrote]...some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest [twist], as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction” (II Pet. 3:15-16). Knowing how most people think, and completely unaware of any *rules* of Bible study, teachers and scholars can easily take advantage of the way parts of God’s Word have been written. This applies to more areas of Scripture than what Paul wrote.

The theological institutes and seminaries of this world have developed a systematic way—this can be done consciously or unconsciously (read Romans

8:7 and Jeremiah 17:9)—of spinning or dismissing God’s plain words and meaning in favor of making passages appear to say what they need them to say. These theologians and religionists portray—actually sell—Satan’s doctrines through use of *specific verses*, wrongly understood, that supposedly teach their ideas. This helps easily snare the unwitting and unwary.

Decades ago, a journalist exposed Christians’ ignorance of God’s Word. This has only grown worse today: “A Protestant pastor administered a Bible quiz to the members of his congregation. The questions were very simple. Anyone with a general knowledge of the Bible should have been able to answer all of them easily. The results staggered the pastor. Only 5% of his flock made a commendable grade on the test. 15% failed to give a single correct answer. 60% were unable to name the four Gospels. 75% could not identify Calvary [Golgotha] as...where Jesus was crucified...The vast majority of Americans today are Bible illiterates. They simply have never read the book they profess to regard as the ‘Word of God.’” (*United Press International*)

The reporter concluded: “A great many people have turned away from the Bible because when they do try to read it, they find they cannot understand it...To the modern reader, it has a remote and antiquarian flavor. It is likely to leave him with the impression the Bible is an ancient history book that has no real relevance to his life *here and now*.”

Another quote shows how society considers biblical knowledge unimportant. J.B. Phillips, author of the Phillips New Testament translation, wrote: “It is one of the curious phenomena of modern times that it is considered perfectly respectable to be abysmally ignorant of the Christian faith. Men and women who would be deeply ashamed of having their ignorance exposed in matters of poetry, music, or painting, for example, are not in the least perturbed to be found ignorant of the New Testament” (*The Young Church in Action*).

Christians are to know their Bible! They should always seek to “grow in grace and knowledge” of God’s Word (II Pet. 3:18). We will examine the 12 rules for how to do this.

Rule #1: Ask God for Guidance

Before beginning your Bible study, ask God to open your mind to better understand spiritual principles. Also pray for guidance as to what to study. Then focus on a particular topic, book or chapter. As God opens your thinking, what is confusing to most will become interesting and exciting to you.

First review Psalm 119:33-40. Slowly and carefully digest each verse and each word of these eight verses. We must all come to view God’s Word in this light.

Asking for and receiving understanding from God is no small thing. Many scholars and men of great intelligence have mastered the Hebrew and Greek languages. They have spent entire lives translating and analyzing every Bible verse—but did not understand the messages being conveyed.

For example, James Moffatt translated the Bible into plain language, but its meaning was lost to him. In the preface to his final edition, he wrote, “This is great literature and great religious literature, this collection of ancient writings which we call the Bible, and any translator has a deep sense of responsibility as he undertakes to transmit it to modern readers” (*The Bible, A New Translation*).

He was an intelligent and highly educated man, yet without God’s Spirit and guidance, he saw the Bible as mere *literature*.

Adam Clarke, author of a six-volume commentary, also did not truly understand the Bible. The Pharisees of Jesus’ time were men of great intellect who studied Scripture for endless hours—yet all in vain. If these and other men of great intellect failed to grasp the message of God’s Word, do not assume you can study it and automatically understand on your own.

Only by asking God to open our minds can we understand His Word.

And understanding will diminish as soon as you stop *asking* for guidance. True understanding comes from God.

Rule #2: Study God’s Word for Correction

The second rule is related to the first. Sincerely petition God to correct you through Bible study. This should also be part of your prayer for guidance and understanding.

The Bible shows when and where we err in life and what to do about it—both the diagnosis and the prescription. Notice: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for *doctrine*, for *reproof*, for *correction*, for *instruction in righteousness*: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (II Tim. 3:16).

Another key scripture on correction comes from the prophet Jeremiah: “LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walks to direct his steps. LORD, *correct me*, but with judgment; not in Your anger, lest You bring me to nothing” (Jer. 10:24). Wanting *correction* ultimately comes from within. Christians earnestly seek and desire God to straighten their paths.

Now read this: “Thus says the LORD, The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool: where is the house that you build unto Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things has My hand made, and all those things have been, says the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembles at My Word” (Isa. 66:1-2).

Humility and trembling before God’s Word go hand-in-hand with seeking correction from it. And remember to concentrate on correction of self, not others. Read Matthew 7:3-5.

Rule #3: Prove All Things

God commands Christians to “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good”

Please see **PERSONAL**, page 26



The path to success doesn't have to be complicated.

Does achieving your life goals seem distant, out of reach, IMPOSSIBLE? Most everyone has set out to accomplish their ambitions only to quickly slam into a brick wall of setbacks and difficulties. Soon, they abandon their dreams entirely.

It does not have to be this way! There are seven simple laws governing success. Order your free copy of *The Laws to Success* to begin applying these bedrock principles.

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Four people found dead at house; teen arrested

May 23, 2023 – Four people are dead and a teenager is in police custody following reports Tuesday of a person barricaded in a house. An 18-year-old has been charged with capital...

Kansas City nightclub shooting: 3 people killed, 1 critically injured

May 21, 2023 – Three people were killed and one is in critical condition after a nightclub shooting early Sunday morning...

Two people killed, two injured in New Orleans shootings

May 21, 2023 – New Orleans police are investigating after apparently related shootings Saturday night left two people dead and two injured...

TABC investigating bar lounge shooting that left 1 dead, 3 injured

May 18, 2023 – San Antonio police and the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission are investigating a shooting outside a bar lounge that left one man dead and...

Yuma: 2 teenagers arrested in Arizona shooting last weekend

May 17, 2023 – Two teenagers have been arrested in connection with a shooting at a house party in southwestern Arizona last weekend that left two people dead and five...

New Mexico shooting leaves three people dead and nine injured

May 15, 2023 – At least three people have been killed and multiple people injured after a shooting in Farmington, New Mexico, where police killed the suspected 18-year-old...

Deadly downtown Augusta shooting was a 'targeted attack,' according to sheriff

May 15, 2023 – The Richmond County Sheriff's Office on Monday called the mass shooting in Augusta over the weekend a...

Teen gunman kills 3, wounds 6 in New Mexico before police

May 15, 2023 – An 18-year-old gunman stalked through a New Mexico neighborhood on Monday firing randomly at bystanders, houses and cars, killing three people and...

CHAOS UNCHECKED

Surge in U.S. Mass Killings

MORE THAN five years after his son was gunned down in the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history, Richard Berger still asks why.

Why Stephen Berger was killed the day after celebrating his 44th birthday. Why the gunman rained bullets over the Las Vegas Strip in 2017, turning a country music festival into a bloodbath. Why the massacre's death toll did not shock U.S. leaders into doing more to prevent that kind of violence from happening again and again.

Why?

"It's just a hole in our hearts," Mr. Berger said. "We just don't know, and we just don't know what to say."

For the Bergers, the families of the other 59 victims in Vegas—and relatives and friends of countless others slain in mass killings across the country in the years since—these questions loom as large now as when the crimes happened. Yet the carnage continues, with 2023 starting out at a torrid pace.

Over the first five months and 27 days of this year, 131 people have died in 26 mass killings—an average of one mass killing per week.

The headlines are numbing: Eight people, including three children, shot to death at an outdoor mall in Allen, Texas. Four partygoers slain and 32 injured in small-town Alabama during a Sweet 16 birthday party that ended with a girl kneeling beside her fatally wounded brother. Six people, including three 9-year-old children, gunned down at an elementary school in Nashville.

The May 6 Allen shooting represented the 24th mass killing of the year, according to a database maintained by *The Associated Press* and *USA Today* in a partnership with Northeastern University. That is the most during the first five months of a year since data was first recorded in 2006.

The number killed is a fraction of the total number of people who died by homicide for the year. The database counts killings involving four or more fatalities, not including the perpetrator, the same standard the FBI uses, and tracks a number of variables for each.

"Nobody should be shocked," said Fred Guttenberg, whose 14-year-old daughter, Jaime, was one of 17 people killed at a Parkland, Florida, high school in 2018. "I visit my daughter in a cemetery. Outrage doesn't begin to describe how I feel."

The Parkland victims are among the 2,896 people who have died in mass killings in the U.S. since 2006, according to the database.

Drumbeat of Death

Mass killing atrocities have been driven almost exclusively by gun violence, since all the incidents in 2023 involved firearms in some way. Shootings account for the vast majority of mass killings, though there are examples where the perpetrator used knives or other weapons as well.

Experts point to a few contributing factors: a general increase in all types of gun violence in recent years, the proliferation of firearms amid lax gun laws, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic including the stress of long months in quarantine, a political climate unable or unwilling to change the status quo in meaningful ways and an increased emphasis on violence in U.S. culture.

Such explanations are of little comfort not only to the families ripped apart by the killings but to Americans everywhere who are reeling from the cascading, collective trauma of mass violence.

This year's killings have happened in different ways, from family and neighborhood disputes to school and workplace shootings to explosions of gunfire in public spaces. They have taken place in rural as well as urban settings. Sometimes people knew their killers; other times, they did not.

The Las Vegas shooter's motive remains unknown even now. The high-stakes gambler was apparently angry over how the casinos treated him despite his high-roller status. Still, the FBI has never uncovered a definitive reason for the slaughter, which ended with more lives lost than in any single mass killing in decades.

Contributing to 2023's steady drumbeat of death: the grisly murder-suicide in Utah that left five children, their parents and their grandmother dead just days into the new year; seven people found shot to death in rural Oklahoma after a man killed his wife, her three children and two missing teenagers; four people found shot to death in an RV in a small Mojave Desert community in California.

Yet while these tragic events garner an outsized amount of attention in the news media and the public's mind, they represent only a tiny fraction of overall gun deaths.

Far more frequent are fatal shootings involving fewer than four people and deaths from domestic violence. And then there are the suicides, which comprise more than half of the 17,000 gun deaths so far this year, according to the Gun Violence Archive, which monitors news media and police reports to compile data.

Still, mass killings spark the deepest fear in most people's hearts.

"People around the country all send their kids to schools—and they worry about if they send their kid to school, are they going to get shot?" said Daniel Webster, a professor at the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions.

The fact is, though they are less common than other gun deaths, the mass killings keep happening—20 years after Columbine, 10 years after Sandy Hook, five years after Las Vegas and one year after massacres at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, and an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas.

What Can Be Done?

The 2023 numbers stand out even more when they are compared with the tally for full-year totals since data was collected. The U.S. recorded 30 or fewer mass killings in more than half of the years in the database, so to be at 26 almost halfway through this year is remarkable.

The violence has erupted from coast to coast and was sparked by various motives. Murder-suicides and domes-

Redwood City: Witnesses, videos show chaotic scene at deadly police shooting

May 7, 2023 — Bystander accounts and videos shed new details of the harrowing scene at El Camino Real Tuesday ...

Allen Premium Outlets shooting: 8 killed

May 6, 2023 — Eight people were killed in a shooting at an outlet mall near Dallas...

Columbus police investigate shootings in Short North, other areas

May 8, 2023 — The Columbus Division of Police is investigating three separate shootings...

Lake Wales, Florida, shooting leaves 4 dead including child

May 2, 2023 — Four people were found dead with apparent gunshot wounds in Lake Wales, Fla., police said. The four—a woman and her three children...

Mojave, CA, mass shooting killed four, three women

May 1, 2023 — Some new details trickled out Monday about the four people killed in a mass shooting in Mojave, the Kern County Sheriff's Office said. Investigators said one man and...

7 people found dead in Oklahoma were shot in the head

April 30, 2023 — The bodies of seven people were found inside a home in Henryetta, Okla., authorities said...

Philadelphia shooting: 3 teens killed

Apr 30, 2023 — Three teenagers—including a 14-year-old—were killed and another was injured during a shooting in...



A woman is comforted during a visit to the memorial setup near the scene of a mass shooting in Allen, Texas (May 9, 2023).

JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

tic violence, gang retaliation, school shootings and workplace vendettas. All have taken the lives of four or more people at once since January 1.

Yet barriers to change remain. The likelihood of Congress reinstating a ban on semi-automatic rifles appears far off. Last year, the Supreme Court set new standards for reviewing the nation's gun laws, calling into question firearms restrictions nationwide.

The pace of mass shootings so far this year does not necessarily foretell a new annual record. In 2009, the bloodshed slowed and the year finished with a final count of 32 mass killings and 172 fatalities. Those figures just barely exceed the averages of 31.1 mass killings and 162 victims a year, according to an analysis of data dating back to 2006.

Gruesome records have been set within the last decade. The data shows a high of 46 mass killings in 2019 and 230 people slain in such tragedies in 2017. That year, 60 people died in the shooting referenced earlier at an outdoor country music festival on the Las Vegas Strip. The massacre still accounts for the most fatalities from a mass shooting in modern America.

“Here’s the reality: If somebody is determined to commit mass violence, they’re going to,” said Jaclyn Schildkraut, executive director of the Rockefeller Institute of Government’s Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium. “And it’s our role as society to try and put up obstacles and barriers to make that more difficult.”

But there is little indication at the state or federal level—with a handful of exceptions—that many significant policy changes are on the horizon.

Some states have tried to impose more gun control within their borders. In April, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer signed a new law mandating criminal background checks to purchase rifles and shotguns, whereas the state previously required them only for people buying pistols. Later that month, Washington Governor Jay Inslee signed a law banning certain kinds of semi-automatic rifles. But it faces a federal court challenge.

Other states are experiencing a new round of pressure. In conservative Tennessee, protesters descended on the state Capitol to demand more gun regulation after the March Nashville school shooting.

At the federal level, President Joe Biden last year signed a milestone gun violence bill, toughening background checks for the youngest gun buyers, keeping firearms from more domestic violence offenders and helping states use red flag laws that enable police to ask courts to take guns from people who show signs they could turn violent.

What Can We Expect?

Despite the blaring headlines, mass killings are statistically rare, perpetrated by just a handful of people each year in a country of nearly 335 million. And there is no way to predict whether this year's events will continue at this rate.

Sometimes mass killings happen back-to-back—like in January, when deadly events in California occurred just two days apart—while other months pass without bloodshed.

“We shouldn't necessarily expect that this—one mass killing every less than seven days—will continue,” said Northeastern University criminologist James Alan Fox, who oversees the database. “Hopefully it won't.”

Still, experts and advocates decry the proliferation of guns in the U.S. in recent years, including record sales during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We have to know that this isn't the way to live,” said John Feinblatt, president of Everytown for Gun Safety. “We don't have to live this way. And we cannot live in a country with an agenda of guns everywhere, every place and every time.”

Jaime Guttenberg would be 19 years old now. Her father now spends his days as a gun control activist.

“America shouldn't be surprised by where we are today,” Mr. Guttenberg said. “It's all in the numbers. The numbers don't lie.”

Can We Know Why?

Even people who study mass killings are perplexed by the sustained pace of the brutality.

“We have plenty of examples of things that seem to be at the breaking

point in this country,” said Katherine Schweit, a former FBI executive who created the agency's active shooter protocol after Sandy Hook. “When I was asked to work on this in 2013, I didn't ever imagine 10 years later I'd still be working on the same thing.”

It will take years—if even possible—for researchers to pinpoint what's behind the drastic increase in gun violence. Advocates say some measures could perhaps avert such crimes—firearms reform and weapons bans among them—but note there is little appetite on Capitol Hill to implement them.

“I think the United States has a relationship with guns unlike any other country in the world,” said Kelly Drane, research director for the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. “These events are a consequence of our failure to put in place prevention measures.”

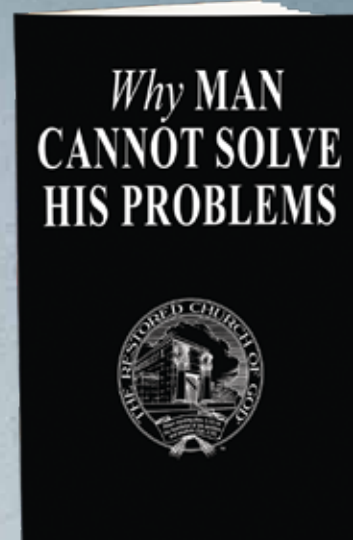
For now, any legislative efforts by Washington, D.C., and individual states have done little to slow the pace of violence or alleviate the nation's pain, further exacerbated by the pandemic and a rapidly growing political and cultural divide.

“These tragedies compounded one after the other, making it almost too much to bear,” said Roxanne Cohen Silver, a psychology professor at the University of California, Irvine, who studies coping with traumatic life events.

The mass killings, Ms. Silver noted, “are just another tragedy on top of all of these other psychological and emotional challenges.”

Stephen Berger's father, Richard, is now 80. He spends his days with his grandchildren—one is a soccer goalie who reminds him of Steve, who had a passion for basketball. Their family awards annual athletic scholarships at Stephen's high school.

Mr. Berger watches the teenagers as they approach the next phase of their young lives, flush with promise and full of life. But his son is dead, and five years later, he is still left wondering: Why? □



FINALLY, AN ANSWER...

Human ingenuity has brought awesome advancements in science, technology and exploration. Yet the world is wracked with the same problems of violence, famine, disease and inequality. Why this paradox? The booklet *Why Man Cannot Solve His Problems* gives the plain Bible answers to the awful evils plaguing Earth today.

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7 OLD TESTAMENT LAWS THAT WOULD FIX THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

These surprising ordinances would utterly remake the world for the better.

BY SAMUEL C. BAXTER

“THE LOVE of money is a root of all kinds of evil...” the apostle Paul said in I Timothy 6:10 (NKJV). This is fact. But equally true in our times is the common saying that “money makes the world go round.”

Having a healthy, vibrant economy is key to success across the globe. Yet, no matter how hard humanity tries, widespread prosperity remains far from reach.

The economy is often described as complicated. But it is also something else: CLEARLY BROKEN. Today’s inequality includes a vast wealth gap that is difficult to comprehend. According to the United Nations: “In 2018, the 26 richest people in the world held as much wealth as half of the global population (the 3.8 billion poorest people), down from 43 people the year before.”

The world’s wealthiest individuals are worth \$100-plus billion. According to one estimate, one of the world’s richest men makes about \$468 million per day, which accounts for an astonishing \$5,422 per second.

On the other end of the economic spectrum is this: Over half of the world lives on less than \$5.50 per day, the World Bank estimates.

The economy—which Investopedia defines as “all of the activities related to the production, consumption, and trade of goods and services in an entity”—is a crucial indicator of how well individuals and nations are faring. This is why the current financial climate is often a major driver of political elections. Woe to the incumbent who is campaigning during lean times.

Economists bring no lasting solutions. Trends go up and down and up and down. Changing interest rates, printing more money and changing tax rates are three levers governments pull to even things out—but each has hefty downsides.

Yet there are specific laws that could actually fix the global economy—and they are found in the Old Testament. To modern ears, they could seem overly optimistic, even radical. They would be laughed out of the U.S. Congress. The

UK Parliament would not give them the time of day. They would not be welcome in the Kremlin, the Reichstag or the Great Hall of the People in China.

Even so, these are laws God enacted for ancient Israel. If they were implemented the world over, they would change *everything*. Inequality would cease. Hard work would be rewarded. The rich *would not* just get richer, and the poor *would not* only get poorer.

When learning about these laws, realize they show God’s mind on economics. As you read, you can imagine what He thinks of what is occurring around the world today.

1. Years of Release

We start with perhaps the most revolutionary economic principle in the Bible. Every seven years in ancient Israel, *all debts* were forgiven.

Read the statute in Deuteronomy 15: “At the end of every seven years you shall make a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor that lends ought [anything] unto his neighbor shall release it; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, or of his brother; because it is called the LORD’s release” (vs. 1-2).

God calls this *His* “release.” He emphasized this law’s crucial importance by stating that it belongs to Him.

The total world debt is a staggering \$305 trillion. Imagine all worldwide debt disappearing in an instant. It would cause a *hard* reset of all economies. Currently, the U.S. has over \$31 trillion in national debt. Of this, over \$24 trillion is external debt, meaning money owed to foreign creditors. The UK has \$8.73 trillion in external debt, France has \$7.04 trillion and Germany \$6.46 trillion.

Think also of the \$1.75 trillion that Americans hold in student loan debt and over \$88 billion in medical debt. That burden would be instantly erased!

Such a policy makes no sense in today’s world. Implementing it would require remaking the global economy—especially during the first round of debt relief.

This first Old Testament policy is one of forgiveness. Rather than allow-

ing individuals and nations to dig deep financial holes, they would be given merciful relief every seven years—a clean slate to build something better.

In addition to the seven-year release, there was an even bigger reset that occurred every 50 years: “And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you” (Lev. 25:10).

At that time, any land purchased during the previous five decades was returned to the original owners. Also, anyone who fell on hard times and sold themselves as bondservants were freed from their charge. Both practices had an expiration date of the Jubilee Year.

Today, these automatic economic pressure release valves would tamp down on the ever-expanding chasm between rich and poor. Notice that this system allows industrious individuals to purchase land to expand their harvests—they were allowed to make money and be successful—yet it was not an ever-increasing amount of wealth that would be passed on to children and grandchildren without end.

Leviticus 25:14 shows an overall theme for God’s economic system: “And if you sell ought unto your neighbor, or buy ought of your neighbor’s hand, you shall not oppress one another.”

YOU SHALL NOT OPPRESS ONE ANOTHER. If only this were followed today, even a little!

2. Workers’ Rights

The next Old Testament Law involves how bosses treat their employees: “You shall not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of your brethren, or of your strangers that are in your land within your gates: at his day you shall give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and sets his heart upon it: lest he cry against you unto the LORD, and it be sin unto you” (Deut. 24:14-15).

Again, God does not want human beings to oppress one another. This

means He hates any exploitation or extortion of workers.

Today, employees rise up and protest when they feel mistreated. But corporations and employers often look for ways to increase profits, not caring whether it makes the lives of their workers miserable. While this is certainly the case in Western nations, think of even poorer working conditions such as sweatshops in nations with fewer regulations.

Notice what verse 15 calls such practices: SIN. Economic systems today favor those who sin. Do not sugarcoat it!

Think of wage theft in developed nations. In 2017, the non-partisan Economic Policy Institute found that employers in the 10 most populous U.S. states stole \$8 billion annually from 2.4 million workers. That means each was underpaid by about \$3,300 per year.

Fair, regular payment was an essential worker's right in the Old Testament. The verse mentions being paid every day, which would have been crucial in ancient times. Without refrigeration, food needed to be purchased almost every day. To eat, people experiencing poverty would need funds every day. If an employer withheld these funds, they would be sentencing their staff to go hungry.

The greater principle of this command is clear: God says not to take advantage of the poor and needy. While the verse uses the example of paying workers daily, it also reiterates not to "oppress" them. That word can mean to violate, extort and deceive.

3. Simplified Taxes

Ancient Israel had a straightforward tax system. God commanded everyone to give one-tenth of their income: "And all the *tithe* of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD's: it is holy unto the LORD" (Lev. 27:30).

Instead of the complex codes of today, God has a simple system: A tenth of your gross income goes to Him.

These funds were wages for the Levites, who served in both a religious and governmental capacity. They were

the main teachers (Deut. 33:10) and musicians (I Chron. 15:16-22) for the nation, and integral in upholding public health (Lev. 13). The Levites were also Israel's lead judges (Deut. 17:8-11).

This much power and influence in the hands of one family tribe could be problematic. To mitigate this, God limited the Levites' inheritance to only their tithe wages (Num. 18:20-21).

An additional tithe-funded social program existed for the downtrodden. Every three years, Israelites would give an additional 10 percent for this purpose. More on that later.

Realize the Levites could not increase taxes or give tax breaks to the wealthy. This mitigated potential corruption. Whenever the Levites were caught exploiting the people, the consequences were severe. In I Samuel, the Levites Hophni and Phineas were stealing from Israelites, and they met an untimely end as a result (2:12-17; 4:12-18).

4. No Interest

The next law would again immediately implode the modern economic system. But it would result in a much fairer and more just world.

In ancient Israel, charging interest was forbidden: "If you lend money to any of My people that is poor by you, you shall not be to him as a usurer, neither shall you lay upon him usury" (Ex. 22:25).

God does not want interest paid out in nations that obey Him. In other words, He does not permit lenders to create a business around making money off other people's debt.

Today, central banks adjust interest rates to manage the economy and influence individuals to buy or save. Banks and credit card companies lend to businesses or individuals with hefty interest attached. Interest is a way to amass wealth.

In an interest-free system, predatory lending of any sort would be nonexistent.

Despite outlawing interest, God still told the Israelites to lend to one another. Those who were more well-off

were encouraged to help others as they could. They would lend funds with a reasonable payment plan.

Any lender today would think, *Why would I lend if I knew a year of release is coming?*

This idea is also addressed in the Bible. The longer passage reveals more of God's mind on economics: "If there be among you a poor man of one of your brethren within any of your gates in your land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your poor brother: but you shall open your hand wide unto him, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wants" (Deut. 15:7-8).

Verse 9 cuts through human nature: "Beware that there be not a thought in your wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and your eye be evil against your poor brother, and you give him nothing; and he cry unto the LORD against you, and it be sin unto you."

God then promised blessings for those who did lend freely (vs. 10).

5. Programs for the Poor

Deuteronomy 15:11 summarizes a critical economic principle: "For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command you, saying, You shall open your hand wide unto your brother, to your poor, and to your needy, in your land."

The poor shall never cease out of the land. Life comes with ups and downs—and there will always be those who are blessed with more and those who have less. God wants those with more to give freely and willingly to the impoverished.

Do not misunderstand God's laws. Yes, He wanted those blessed with more to give—yet He did not want the impoverished to lazily demand funds, showing no effort to manage their money better and improve their financial circumstances.

Such was the case with the next Old Testament law: On top of a flat 10 percent tithe, everyone gave another tithe

every three years. This was to be distributed to the poor and needy in the land.

Deuteronomy 26:12 outlines this additional tenth and says it is for “the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that they may eat within your gates, and be filled.”

The statute is restated in chapter 14 and adds that obedience will allow God to “bless you in all the work of your hand which you do” (vs. 29)

Ancient Israel’s social programs were not just “free money.” These benefits required work from the recipients as well. The New Testament Church followed this same tithe command in the first century. It had this qualification: “If any would not work, neither should he eat” (II Thes. 3:10).

Leviticus 23:22 shows how effort was required for the poor to receive benefits: “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not make clean riddance of the corners of your field when you reap, neither shall you gather any gleanings of your harvest: you shall leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger: I am the LORD your God.”

When harvesting, the landowner was to leave the corners of the field for those who needed it. Instead of getting handouts, the poor would gather their own food—they would *work* for it.

Also, recognize that God is knocking down the idea of getting every ounce of profit from a harvest. He is discouraging the single-minded goal of making as much money as possible.

Deuteronomy 24 expands the gleanings command beyond harvesting a field to all produce by giving the example of picking olives (vs. 20) and gathering grapes (vs. 21).

God also gave instructions for the downtrodden in legal matters: “You shall not wrest [pervert] the judgment of your poor in his cause” (Ex. 23:6).

6. Honest Weights and Measures

Fairness in business dealings was another law in ancient Israel: “You shall do no injustice in judgment, in mea-

surement of length, weight, or volume” (Lev. 19:35, NKJV).

Honesty and integrity in business are incredibly hard to find today. Think of all the ways customers are cheated. There is price gouging during times of crisis. There is shrinkflation, where products are deceptively sold in lesser quantities with the same or higher prices or where the quality is decreased without notice. There are all the counterfeit products on the market—or all the ones that simply do not work.

Of course, this command cuts both ways. Consumers must also be fair and honest. The National Retail Federation estimated that shrink—what the industry calls the loss of inventory—amounted to 1.4 percent of retail value in 2021. That amounted to \$94.5 billion. Most of that amount comes from shoplifting.

How important is having fair “balances” and “weights” (vs. 36) to God? Similar commands are repeated in Deuteronomy 25:13, Proverbs 11:1, 16:11, 20:10 and Ezekiel 45:10.

Leviticus 19:13 reemphasizes the importance of ethical business practices: “You shall not defraud your neighbor, neither rob him...”

“Defraud” here, similar to “oppress” from earlier, means to extort, exploit or deceive. And “rob” can mean to seize or plunder. Imagine a world where this was not happening.

Further making the point, the very next verse after being told not to defraud your neighbor is this: “You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God: I am the LORD” (vs. 14).

God puts cursing the disabled and purposefully tripping a blind person in the same context as being fair and honest with anyone with whom you do business.

7. The First Commandment

Let’s face it: All these Old Testament laws would never work in today’s

world. The modern economy is based on getting and greed—while God’s is based upon giving and outflowing concern for others. Being entirely profit-driven is clearly *not* His Way!

This is where the last law comes into play, and it is truly the most revolutionary. God commands: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3).

These words are the first of the 10 Commandments. Without all individuals and nations believing in the same God and obeying Him, none of this would work.

God knows this too. His ultimate plan is to bring a globe-ruling super-government: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:2-3).

Daniel 2:44 shows that this Kingdom will “not be left to other people” and that God Himself will rule it and enforce it. Only then can we truly erase the gap between rich and poor, ensure that everyone has what they need, no one is drowning in debt and everyone is fair to each other.

But just because these laws are impossible to implement in today’s global economy does not mean individuals cannot reap the many benefits of applying Bible principles. God’s Word has much more to say about fairness, compassion and social responsibility. It explains the importance of hard work, ambition and industriousness—as well as the keys to success.

Read our booklet *End All Your Financial Worries* at rcg.org/eayfw to dig more deeply into God’s economic instructions. You can apply them in your life and reap the blessings He promises. □



The Truth Behind Our Divided Media

Americans point to the media as a leading cause of political division. Investigating the problem reveals a lot about the nation itself.

BY EDWARD L. WINKFIELD

IN A recent interview with *CBS News*, former U.S. President Barack Obama expressed his anxiety about the future of the United States, calling out a “divided media” as his primary concern.

“The thing that I’m most worried about is the degree to which we’ve now had a divided conversation, in part because we have a divided media,” Mr. Obama told the interviewer.

Half the country would applaud this seemingly objective sentiment from the former president. The other half would quickly point to Mr. Obama as part of the problem.

The strong emotion on both sides perfectly sets the table for what this article is about.

An increasing number of Americans are getting fed up with the division in the country, blaming politi-

cians, corporations and the media itself for the rift.

Nearly three-quarters of adults say the news media is increasing political polarization in America. Just under half say they have little to no trust in the media’s ability to report the news fairly and accurately. This is according to a recent survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.



“The news riles people up,” said 53-year-old Barbara Jordan, a Democrat from Hutchinson, Kansas. Ms. Jordan said she now does her own online research instead of going by what she sees on the TV news. “You’re better off Googling something and learning about it. I trust the internet more than I do the TV,” she told *The Associated Press*.

The ability of individual citizens to customize their news diet through the

internet and social media can thrust people into an echo chamber in which they repeatedly hear the same information and opinions. The result is a confirmation bias which drives people to sources that only reinforce their existing beliefs.

A GCF Global article titled “What is an echo chamber?” explained the phenomenon. “Echo chambers can create misinformation and distort a person’s perspective so they have difficulty considering opposing viewpoints and discussing complicated topics.”

The article added, “On the internet, almost anyone can quickly find like-minded people and perspectives via social media and countless news sources.”

People stuck in echo chambers are precisely whom the modern news organizations seek.

Strong emotions drive viewership. For instance, during the presidency of Donald Trump—one of the most polarizing figures in U.S. history—news viewership and attention exploded.

If you despised President Trump, outlets were catering to you. If you thought Mr. Trump could do no wrong, opposing outlets were catering to you, too. People divided into their respective camps and dug in—all to the exuberance of media outlets.

The public’s increased news interest seemed to come at the cost of their perception of the media’s objectivity.

Only 16 percent of adults remain very confident in the media’s ability to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. In comparison, 45 percent have little to no confidence in the media’s objectivity.

“Everyone tells a different story. The media does nothing but stir up fear,” said Janis Fort, a retired 71-year-old Republican who lives in Navarre, Florida. “For me, and for most of the people I know, we feel like we’re totally in the dark.”

Partisan views on cable news outlets and social media platforms are conditioning Americans to see one another as enemies, said Joe Salegna, a

Republican who lives on Long Island, New York.

“I think it’s tearing this country apart,” Mr. Salegna, 50, told AP. “Since the 2016 election I think it’s gotten a lot worse.”

Media companies may be adding to their bottom lines, but at what cost? The battle for eyeballs, clicks and followers is dividing the nation.

Free Press?

Freedom of the press under the First Amendment gives the media the right to publish and disseminate news without the threat of censorship or constraint. Yet with this freedom comes ethical responsibility.

News outlets have an obligation to act in good faith and the public interest. At least that is what should be happening. The government is supposed to help ensure the press behaves appropriately. How are they doing?

Only 44 percent of respondents in the AP poll say the U.S. government is doing a good job upholding freedom of the press standards, while 24 percent believe it is doing a bad job.

In our highly politicized environment, many see the government less as a media regulator and instead accuse them of using the media to disseminate its propaganda.

Gone are the days when local issues stayed local. Now every story, regardless of where it took place, becomes fodder fueling the national narratives of politicians seeking to leverage opinions to their side of the aisle.

According to the AP poll, only around a third of adults feel that the news media do a good job covering broader topics such as the military and national defense, crime and elections. It is these issues, along with polarizing topics such as abortion, civil rights and climate change, that politicians and audience-hungry media use to boost their revenues.

A big problem is that these broader issues play differently in every local community. For instance, those in towns bordering Mexico view immigration stories differently than those

in the Midwest. Yet this does not stop national media from broadly reporting such stories, often out of context, whipping up their audience. Nuance and subtlety are nowhere to be found.

According to the survey, people say they value in-depth and investigative reporting, but are proving less likely to engage with such content. When trying to understand these issues, people often scan headlines instead of slogging through comprehensive investigative reporting or stories with in-depth background information and analysis. The result? Consumers form opinions without having all the facts.

At best, an unwillingness to engage with long-form stories leaves news outlets to wonder if pouring resources into in-depth reporting is worth it. At worst, the public being headline-focused incentivizes outlets to manipulate them into reading sensationalized stories with the truth stretched painfully thin.

On top of all of this, political bias usually rules the day. Those working for a left-leaning outlet are expected to express left-leaning views. The same applies to right-leaning outlets. This all further obscures what is actually going on in the world.

There is little motivation for producers and reporters to sincerely and objectively offer a counter-narrative to the prevailing view of their employer and colleagues. Speaking against the views of senior staff or editors can amount to career suicide. This reality can lead to an echo chamber even within a media company.

Misinformation

Nearly all adults surveyed—93 percent—view the spread of misinformation, which is false or inaccurate information, as a problem.

About two-thirds blame its spread on politicians, social media companies and their users. But nearly as many, 58 percent, hold the news media responsible. And when it comes to fixing the problem, 63 percent of adults say the news media has a great deal or quite a bit of responsibility to address the spread of false or misleading information.

What makes misinformation difficult to police is that it is not tied to intent. Unlike *disinformation*, which is the intentional spread of lies or partial truths, *misinformation* can result from sloppy reporting or blending opinion with the facts of a story. The result, however, is the same: A growing lack of trust in media.

Concern about the threat posed by misinformation unites Americans of both parties. A third of adults say they see stories with false claims from politicians or misleading headlines every day. Nineteen percent say they face conspiracy theories in news stories daily.

Digital media throws fuel on the fire. To paraphrase an old saying: Fake news gets halfway around the world before the carefully reported truth can put its pants on. While most reputable outlets will revise or retract false or inaccurate stories, the damage caused by bad initial reporting has already been done.

Coverage of recent presidential elections, the coronavirus pandem-

ic, protests against police killings of black Americans and other events convinced many Americans that the media should not be believed.

Given the widespread concerns about misinformation, most adults report engaging in behaviors at least some of the time to avoid consuming or spreading misinformation, such as checking multiple sources or deciding not to share content on social media. Yet most do not have the time or the desire to go to such lengths.

“There still is good journalism, it’s just the internet has made it so that anybody can be a quote-unquote journalist,” said Chris Nettell, of Hickory Creek, Texas, who said he leans Democrat. “We have some news media that only goes after a certain segment of society, and then those people think, because it’s all they read, that everyone else believes it too.”

Social Media

Social media has made things worse. According to a 2020 Pew survey, about



President Donald Trump stands before microphones as he speaks to members of the media on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, D.C. (Feb. 7, 2020).

AP/PATRICK SEMANSKY

half of U.S. adults get their news from Twitter, Facebook and the like.

From the audience's perspective, social media is appealing because it has little to no filters between specific personalities or outlets and the public. Some view this as meaning the information has less bias—but the tradeoff is that it comes with little to no journalistic standards.

Some are beginning to understand this, with nearly two-thirds of respondents to the poll saying that when they see a news story on social media, they expect it to be inaccurate. However, those who regularly rely on social media for their news are more likely to trust it than others.

“So many people get their information from social media, and people believe whatever they want to believe,” said Araceli Cervantes, a 39-year-old Chicago mother of four who said she is a Republican.

Research shows that fragmentation of the media ecosystem is primarily driven by the internet and contributes to political polarization. “We should be concerned for the health of democracy,” said Joshua Tucker, a political scientist at New York University who studies partisanship and co-directs NYU's Center for Social Media.

Much of the reason for the rise in social media as a news source is the breakdown of trust in legacy media such as *The New York Times*, *Time* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Often this stems from a perceived control by corporate or government interests or the growing lack of public trust in major institutions.

In rejecting mainstream media, however, people expose themselves to less established, and in many cases less reputable, news sources.

Newer outlets are often under-resourced and lack the training and experience to cover news in a professional, non-partisan way. And many have no intention of objectivity and seek to do whatever is necessary to garner attention. “Getting clicks” is how things work on social media, but applying that to the news does nothing

but erode established standards and journalistic integrity.

Driven by Nature

The media has clearly earned some blame for the nation's political and ideological divide. But slow down and consider: Is the press the *cause* of division in America or only the *result*?

“Research shows that fragmentation of the media ecosystem is primarily driven by the internet and contributes to political polarization.”

Media companies are for-profit businesses. Six companies control most of U.S. media, with five controlling many of the most well-known outlets. Comcast controls *NBC*. Walt Disney Company oversees *ABC*. Warner Bros. Discovery owns *CNN*. National Amusements has *CBS*. NewsCorp controls *Fox News*. These companies, worth a combined \$396 billion, are all fiercely competing for the attention of hundreds of millions of media-hungry Americans.

And while these companies may dominate the media landscape, there is the constant presence of smaller news companies and start-ups looking to siphon off the vast billions that flow through the industry annually. Results show that people want outlets that take a firm stance on their side of the ideological aisle while obliterating the other side.

So, if the news industry is simply giving people what they want, who is really to blame for the division? A profit-driven media industry or the agenda-driven audience they seek to satisfy?

This chicken-or-egg conundrum is hard to pin down for an important reason. Both the media *and* its audience

are made up of people. Why is that important? Because people are human, and humans have *human nature*.

The Bible reveals that human nature is driven by vanity, jealousy, lust, hatred, selfishness, greed and more. Making matters worse, human nature has a built-in unwillingness to change. This drives people to seek out what they want to hear—news that espouses and validates their existing beliefs.

Ideally, news would primarily be fact-driven, not tailored to a particular audience. If an outlet is going to give the perspective of a particular side, it should offer equal space to other points of view. Sadly, this even-handed approach does not sell papers or get clicks.

Human nature is at the center of many of mankind's problems and is the primary cause of America's media divide.

In his booklet *Did God Create Human Nature?*, David C. Pack explores why human beings are capable of both significant achievements and terrible evils. He explains that God did not create human nature but that it came from an invisible spirit called Satan, who influences and deceives people.

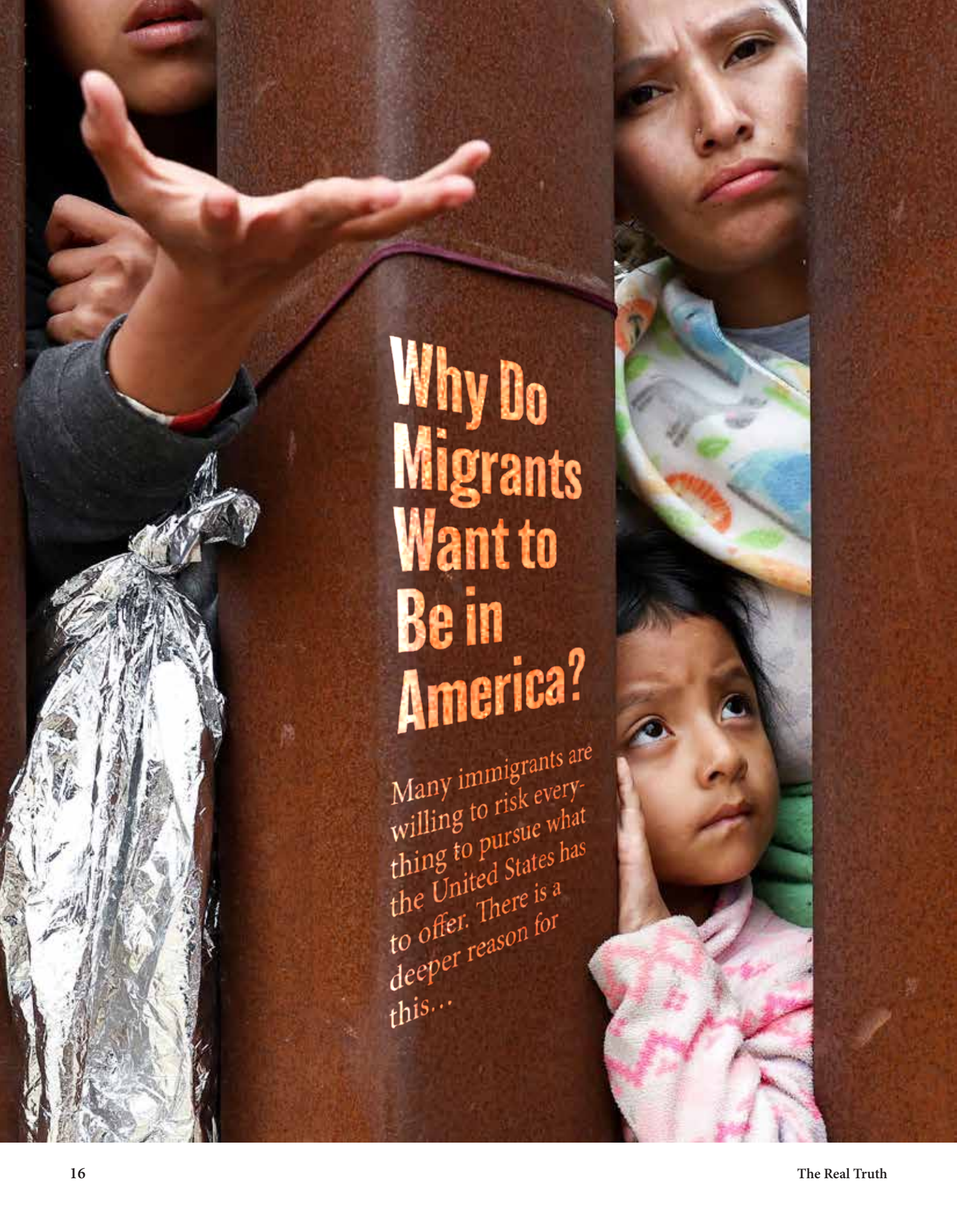
The Bible reveals his power: “The *god of this world* has blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ... should shine unto them” (II Cor. 4:4).

Because of his powerful influence, you should view human nature as really *Satan's* nature.

This may seem harsh and hard to believe at first. But the Bible shows that Satan broadcasts his attitudes, moods and impulses into human minds, making them think they are their own. Read Ephesians 2:2. This gives him godlike influence over society.

Human nature is hostile to the true God and His truth (Rom. 8:7). People desperately need God's help to overcome this and break the pattern of thinking the way the devil does.

To learn more about human nature and other specific ways it affects people, read *Did God Create Human Nature?* at rcg.org/dgchn. □



Why Do Migrants Want to Be in America?

Many immigrants are willing to risk everything to pursue what the United States has to offer. There is a deeper reason for this...



THE DAY President Joe Biden's administration ended a public health measure called Title 42 that blocked many asylum-seekers at the Mexican border during the coronavirus pandemic, Teodoso Vargas was ready to show U.S. officials his scars and photos of his bullet-riddled body.

Instead, he stood frozen with his pregnant wife and 5-year-old son at a Tijuana crossing, mere feet from U.S. soil.

He was unsure of the new rules rolled out with the change and whether taking the next few steps to approach U.S. officials to ask for asylum in person would lead to entry or instead force a return to his native Honduras.

"I can't go back to my country," said Mr. Vargas, a long scar snaking down his neck from surgery after being shot nine times in his homeland during a robbery. "Fear is why I don't want to return. If I can just show the proof I have, I believe the U.S. will let me in."

Asylum-seekers say joy over the end of the Title 42 public health restriction is turning into anguish with the uncertainty about how the Biden administration's new rules affect them.

Though the government opened some new avenues for immigration, the fate of many people is largely left to a U.S. government app only used for scheduling an appointment at a port of entry and unable to decipher human suffering or weigh the vulnerability of applicants.

The CBP One app is a key tool in creating a more efficient and orderly system at the border "while cutting out unscrupulous smugglers who profit from vulnerable migrants," the Department of Homeland Security said in an email to *The Associated Press*.

But since its rollout in January, the app has been criticized for technical problems. Demand has far outstripped the roughly 1,000 appointments available on the app each day.

As a Honduran man, Mr. Vargas does not qualify for many of the legal pathways Washington has introduced. One program gives up to 30,000 Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans per month a shot at humanitarian parole if they apply online, have a financial sponsor in the U.S. and arrive by air. Minors traveling alone are exempt from the rules.

Migrants who do not follow the rules, the government has said, could be deported back to their homelands and barred from seeking asylum for five years.

Mr. Vargas said he decided not to risk it. He has been logging onto the app each day at 9 a.m. for the past three months from his rented room in a crime-riddled Tijuana neighborhood. His experience is not unique to him—it is shared by tens of thousands of other asylum-seekers in Mexican border towns.

Immigration lawyer Blaine Bookey said for many on the border "there seems to be no option right now for people to ask for asylum if they don't have an appointment through the CBP app." The government has said it does not turn away asylum-seekers but prioritizes people who use the app.

Mr. Bookey's group, Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, is one of the lead plaintiffs, along with the American Civil Liberties Union, challenging some of the new rules in federal court in San Francisco, including a requirement that people first apply for asylum in a country they crossed on the way to the U.S. They are asking the court to allow an asylum request by anyone on U.S. soil.

Texas Republican lawmakers have also sued. Among other things, they argue the CBP One app encourages illegal immigration by dispensing appointments without properly vetting whether applicants have a legal basis to stay.

The Biden administration said new measures, including the app, have helped reduce unlawful immigration

An Ecuadorian mother stands with her 4-year-old daughter in a makeshift camp in San Diego, California, as they await volunteer assistance (May 13, 2023).

MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

by more than 70 percent since Title 42 ended May 11.

More than 79,000 people were admitted under CBP One from its January 12 launch through the end of April. From May 12 to May 19, an average of 1,070 people per day presented themselves at the ports of entry after securing an appointment on the app, the government stated. It did not provide updated figures but said the numbers should grow as the initiative is scaled up.

The administration has also highlighted improvements made in recent weeks. The app can prioritize those who have been trying the longest. Appointments are opened online throughout the day to avoid system overload. People with acute medical conditions or facing imminent threats of murder, rape, kidnapping or other “exceptionally compelling circumstances” can request priority status, but only in person at a port of entry. The app does not allow input of case details.

Still, some asylum-seekers claim to have been turned away at crossings while making requests, lawyers say.

Koral Rivera, who is from Mexico and eight months pregnant, said she has been trying to obtain an appointment through the app for two months. She recently went to a Texas crossing to present her case to U.S. officials but said Mexican immigration agents in Matamoros blocked her and her husband.

“They tell us to try to get an appointment through the app,” said Mrs. Rivera, whose family has been threatened by drug cartel members.

Priscilla Orta, an immigration attorney with Lawyers for Good Government in Brownsville, Texas, said one Honduran woman in the Mexican border city of Reynosa said a man whom she accuses of raping her tracked her down through her phone, which she was using to secure an appointment.

The woman was raped again, said Ms. Orta, who has not been able to reach her since.

“That is harrowing to realize that you’re just going to have to put up with the abuses in Mexico and just kind of

continue to take it because if you don’t, then you could forever hurt yourself in the long term,” the lawyer said.

Ms. Orta said she previously could ask U.S. border officials at crossings to prioritize children with cancer, victims of torture and others with extenuating circumstances, and usually they would schedule a meeting. But local officials informed her they no longer have guidance from Washington.

“They do not know what to do with these most extremely vulnerable people,” Ms. Orta said, adding that migrants

face tough questions. “Do you risk never qualifying for asylum? Or do you try to wait for an appointment despite the danger?”

Mr. Vargas, a farmer, has no doubt he could prove he and his family fled Honduras out of fear, the first requirement for U.S. entry to start the yearslong legal process for safe refuge. His iPhone is filled with photos of him lying in a hospital bed, tubes snaking out, his swollen face covered in bandages. He has knots of scar tissue on each side of his head from a bullet passing through



Top, an immigrant from Ghana wears an American flag jacket at a migrant transition center for asylum seekers released from Border Patrol custody in Somerton, Arizona (May 12, 2023). Bottom, migrants cross the Rio Bravo river to return to Mexico from the United States after members of the National Guard extended razor wire to inhibit crossing, as seen from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico (May 13, 2023).

TOP, MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM, REUTERS/JOSE LUIS GONZALEZ

his right cheek and exiting the left side of his head. Similar scar tissue dots his back and side.

His spirits were up after Title 42 expired and fellow asylum-seekers at a Tijuana shelter left with appointments. Two weeks later, he was dismayed.

“I can’t find enough work here. I’m either going to have to return to Honduras, but I’ll likely be killed, or I don’t know,” he said. “I feel so hopeless.”

With so many harrowing problems and challenges involved with crossing the border, we must ask a fundamental question: Why do migrants want to be in America?

What Immigrants See

Even when Mexico offers refuge, asylum or work visas to migrants, most vow to continue on into the U.S. Clearly the United States has something migrants seek that cannot be obtained anywhere else.

Some see material prosperity. “We can earn more [in the U.S.] and give something to our family. But there [in Honduras] even when we want to give something to our children, we can’t because the little we earn it’s just for food, to pay the house and the light, nothing else,” said Nubia Morazan, 28, of Honduras to AP as she prepared to set out with her husband and two children.

Immigrants see that Americans, although they do have certain economic hardships, are generally not spending almost everything they make on transportation, with little left for food. And they never have to borrow money from gang members who charge exorbitant interest. (For instance, if you are unable to repay \$250 to a gangbanger in Honduras, your debt becomes \$700 accompanied by death threats.)

Migrants see an overall better quality of life in the United States. They realize that even those who live in “bad” American neighborhoods merely long to move to a better one in the country rather than abandon their citizenship and take off.

Americans are generally unwilling and do not have a need to slog hundreds of miles underneath a baking sun or

clamber aboard foul-smelling garbage trucks to travel toward another country.

Clearly, immigrants see the U.S. with different eyes than most Americans. To them, Americans have been blessed with what no other country can claim. Destitute peoples of other nations recognize and are reaching for those blessings—and understandably so.

Even the fact that many Americans are wary of so many thousands of people trying to enter the country at once helps prove that they are holding onto something special. Americans understand they are blessed with stability, wealth and peace to an extent very few other nations have been—and they want to keep these blessings. Some fear losing jobs to immigrants. Some are anxious about threats to their security, comfort and national pride.

Both sides do have a legitimate desire to enjoy such good things. But neither pauses to consider where these blessings originate. Is there a deeper reason that migrants desire these blessings? And what is the real origin of America’s prosperity?

Source of Blessings

The fact that the U.S. rose to become the most powerful and successful nation in history in a relatively short period of time is an anomaly to historians. But most do not realize that this was foretold to occur—millennia ago!

The editor-in-chief of this magazine, David C. Pack, detailed this in his book *America and Britain in Prophecy*: “The most sought-after destinations for immigration by the oppressed peoples of the world for over a century have been America, Britain and various commonwealth countries. The very mention of these nations became associated with freedom and prosperity!”

The book further explains that these blessings were promised to the descendants of a righteous man who lived thousands of years ago: “Remember God’s promise to Abraham: ‘that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as

the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you have obeyed My voice’ (Gen. 22:17-18).”

It also states: “Abraham’s heirs were to be: (1) A great people, in tremendous strength and numbers—as the stars of the skies; (2) they were to be a source of help to other nations—they would, in type, ‘benefit all the nations of the earth’; and (3) they were to possess the ‘gates of their enemies’—key strategic sea ‘gates,’ which would help establish and fortify world dominance! Through identifying the PEOPLE receiving these blessings—the descendants of Abraham are discovered!”

Think: A single great, powerful nation with a large population. It benefits other nations around the world rather than crushing or conquering them—no other country has offered more humanitarian assistance than the United States. It controlled crucial trade routes, military strongholds, and natural barriers—the Panama Canal, Guam, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Alaska’s Aleutian Islands and more.

For further proof that Abraham’s blessed descendants are the peoples of the United States as well as Britain and its Commonwealth nations, read this free book at rcg.org/aabibp. It will also explain how these blessings came to be, and God’s purpose in giving them.

Those who have attempted to enter America during the time of Title 42 and in the uncertain period we are now in after its expiration are striving to attain these unprecedented blessings, all given to the U.S. as a result of God’s promise to one faithful man.

Yet know that God does not intend to leave the rest of the world out on such benefits. The same Bible that foretold what so many immigrants are today seeking also has more to say about how God intends to bless all other nations and end their plight. For more on this, read *Tomorrow’s Wonderful World – An Inside View!* at rcg.org/tww. □

IS THE HOLY SPIRIT A PERSON?

The topic of the “Holy Ghost” in the Bible can feel confusing and mysterious. This need not be!

BY GARRICK R. OXLEY

“THE HOLY Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.”

If you are reading through the books of the New Testament in order, this statement in Acts 13:2 can seem to come out of left field. By this point, you would have read plenty about Jesus Christ, and He taught about God the Father. Yet there was nothing about a speaking Holy Ghost until now. What does this mean?

The roles of God and Jesus are relatively easy to grasp. One is the Parent, the other the Son. The “Holy Ghost”—more correctly translated Holy *Spirit*—is different. The Spirit is written about in a way that can feel mysterious.

What *is* the Holy Spirit? Is it a person? Many think it is the third member of the Trinity. This belief is common in the Christian world.

Indeed, some verses appear to speak of the Spirit as its own entity. Acts 13:2 is one such place. Other verses seem to describe it as simply a power or force.

All of this can be confusing! As a student of the Bible, your goal is to “prove all things” as God commands (I Thes. 5:21). Yet all the competing interpretations and theological ideas make obeying this verse challenging. But you will be surprised by just how simple the subject becomes after we examine the truth.

Understanding what the Bible really says about the Holy Spirit is critically important. It is *much more* than just an academic exercise. It involves the nature of God, and this knowledge will have a real impact on your life! As with any difficult Bible subject, the place to begin is with the clearest and easiest-to-understand verses.

Basic Knowledge

Just before the resurrected Jesus Christ ascended to heaven, He told His disciples, “You shall receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to

the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8; New King James Version).

We can learn a lot from what this verse is and is not saying. Christ did not describe the Holy Spirit as a person with whom the disciples would develop a relationship. Jesus spoke of “power” that would enable them to fulfill the work He had for them to do. Think of the Holy Spirit as spiritual power.

The Greek word translated power is *dynamis*—from which comes the modern words dynamic and dynamite. This word can mean force, miraculous power, ability, strength, mighty, wonderful work.

Jesus’ promise was fulfilled in Acts 2 on Pentecost when “there appeared unto them [His disciples] cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost” (vs. 3-4). The rest of Acts shows how the disciples harnessed this power to do mighty works, including dramatic healings.

Many verses speak of this spiritual force and what it can do for those who have it. The apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:16 that God “would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with *might* by His Spirit in the inner man.”

The Greek word for might in this verse is the same as power in Acts. In verse 20, Paul added that God “is able to do *exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think*, according to the power that works in us.”

Christ Himself was imbued with this power during His earthly ministry. His miracles are legendary. On one occasion, a woman with a severe health issue for at least 12 years was instantly healed upon touching His garment. When this happened, Jesus knew immediately that “virtue” (*dynamis*) had left Him. Take time to read the full account in Mark 5:24-30.

Galatians 5 begins to show what this power can do within individuals: “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh” (vs. 16). Romans 8 adds, “If you live after the flesh, you shall die: but if you through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, you shall live” (vs. 13).

The Holy Spirit empowers people to grow spiritually and overcome sin. Human effort is not enough to resist the temptations that plague a Christian. Put simply, this spiritual power is a game-changer.

The Spirit also enables a person to truly understand the Bible. God uses it to impart spiritual knowledge: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love Him. *But God has revealed them unto us by His Spirit*: for the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God” (I Cor. 2:9-10).

What about the term “Holy Ghost”? This antiquated phrase in the King James Version brings to mind Casper the Friendly Ghost or the Ghost of Christmas Past. But the Greek word for Ghost is the same as for Spirit—*pneuma*. At the time of the first printing of the King James Version of the

Bible in 1611, the English words spirit and ghost were understood to have the same meaning.

The word *pneuma* bears further examination. It means a current of air, breath (blast) or a breeze; by analogy or figuratively, a spirit. The Hebrew word used for Spirit in the Old Testament, *ruach*, has a similar meaning: wind; by resemblance breath, that is, exhalation.

Other passages emphasize certain qualities of the Holy Spirit. All four gospel accounts describe it as descending like a “dove” upon Jesus (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). John 3:8 likens it to the wind. John 4:14 and 7:38-39 call it living water, with I Thessalonians 5:19 warning that it can be “quenched.” Exodus 31:3 and Ephesians 5:18 speak of being “filled with the Spirit.” A person cannot logically be poured out or quenched. Neither can you be filled with a person. But these characteristics perfectly fit the Spirit as a supernatural power.

Whose Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is not an inert tool or substance for a Christian to use, like flipping a light switch when entering a room. It is an active, living Spirit that links the Christian to God in a unique way.

You may be familiar with John 4:24, which says “God is a Spirit.” God is not a flesh-and-blood being like we are. He is omnipotent and omnipresent and composed of Spirit. Is the Spirit of which God is composed the same as the Holy Spirit? Or different? What about Christ and His Spirit?

Romans 8 begins to clarify this: “They that are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His” (vs. 8-9).

This passage goes a long way in answering the questions we just asked. The phrase “Spirit of God” and “Spirit of Christ” are used. The context shows these terms are interchangeable with “Holy Spirit.” Take time to read the entire chapter. There are not three dis-

tingent Spirits for a Christian to attain—just one.

Ephesians 4:4 says, “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling.” The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God are all the same “one Spirit.” Put another way, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God and Christ!

Romans 8:9 underscores just how vital this is. Lacking the Spirit means a person is “none of His”—in other words, not even a Christian! God would never allow such a pivotal subject to remain murky or unclear to someone who truly wants to serve Him.

God is active in the lives of His people. II Chronicles 16:9 says that He shows “Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him.” But you may have never asked exactly how He involves Himself in human affairs.

It is simple: He uses His Spirit—the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit of God is at work in a Christian’s life, God Himself is at work! He is transforming the converted believer’s sinful, carnal, selfish impulses and desires to align with His own perfect, righteous, loving ways. Read Galatians 5:22-23. Throughout the Bible, examples abound of God using His Spirit to guide, inspire and motivate believers.

In some places, God’s Word speaks of the Holy Spirit as a power or force, as we have seen. Other verses refer to it with humanlike characteristics that point back to God.

For instance, we often see references to the Holy Spirit in the New Testament using personal pronouns such as He or Him. Using these words is not wrong—they refer to God. Keep in mind that the He or Him in these verses is the Being from whom this power originates.

Remember: God influences people through the Spirit. Being led by this Spirit (Rom. 8:14) means being led by God Himself.

Understanding Acts 13:2

Back to Acts 13:2: “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost

said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.”

Notice the phrase “for the work whereunto *I have called them.*” While you may not be familiar with every verse on the subject, most Bible students know God’s Word says that Christians are called.

However, while it is true that Barnabas and Saul were called to become Christians, the context shows that this statement primarily refers to the *ministerial* calling for these two men—the “work” they would be sent to do. Verse 3 shows that the other leaders laid hands on them, which always occurs in ordinations. Verses 4 and 5 show that these men were then “sent forth” to “preach the Word of God.”

Scripture reveals precisely who is responsible for a Christian’s calling—both into God’s way of life in general and into leadership positions within His Church.

I Thessalonians 5:23 describes God the Father as “the very God of peace.” Verse 24 says, “*Faithful is He that calls you, who also will do it.*” God is the Being who calls Christians. John 6:44 and 65 underscore this.

Now read I Corinthians 12:18: “God set the members every one of them in the Body, as it has pleased Him.” The term “Body” here is a reference to the Body of Christ, which is another term for God’s true Church (Col. 1:24). God not only calls people into His way of life, but He also determines the role they have in His Church and ministry—He “sets” people in positions “as it has pleased Him.”

Putting these verses together with Acts 13, the prophets and teachers did not hear an audible voice from the Holy Spirit. These men were being spiritually led by the Being who “called them”—God the Father!

Other Difficult Scriptures

John 14 is another passage that has confused some. Here, Jesus was instructing His disciples just before His betrayal and crucifixion: “I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another

Comforter, that He may abide with you forever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it sees Him not, neither knows Him: but you know Him; for He dwells with you, and shall be in you” (vs. 16-17).

Keep this simple. When Jesus spoke of the Comforter, He was not introducing a new person to the disciples. Instead, He was referring to the power of Acts 1 using a different term. Why? To emphasize another attribute. This Spirit’s power does not just involve miracles, shock and awe—it also comforts those who have it. Read Acts 9:31.

Jesus went on in verse 17 to describe the relationship the disciples would have with God the Father. The term “comforter” is not a proper name denoting personal agency. Just think of the comforter you have on your bed. You can view this spiritual comfort as coming either from the power of the Holy Spirit or from “the God of all comfort” Himself (II Cor. 1:3)—both are true!

You may have also found Acts 5:3 challenging: “Peter said, Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?” This verse can be explained two ways. Ananias was lying to the Holy Spirit in the sense that the power of this Spirit was what enabled Peter to discern the untruth. Also, Ananias was actually lying to God the Father, who, again, is represented by the Holy Spirit.

Another example of this is when the Bible speaks of people who “grieve” (Eph. 4:30) or “[do] despite” (Heb. 10:29) to the Spirit. These actions are being taken toward the Being whose Spirit it is—God.

One last difficult scripture is worth examining. In Matthew 12, Jesus addresses the subject of the unpardonable sin. He said, “Whosoever speaks a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come” (vs. 32).

At first glance, this suggests that Christ and the Holy Spirit are separate beings, but that is not the point here. The emphasis of this verse is to contrast a single act of disobedience—speaking a word—against Jesus to the willful, deliberate pattern of fighting the Holy Spirit’s influence or attributing its power to the devil. The verse does not say that the Spirit of Christ and the Holy Spirit are different spirits.

God’s Spirit and You

A summary: The Holy Spirit is God’s power. It is not a person. It is the way God and Christ work in human beings. When the Spirit guides or inspires a Christian to do something, it is really God doing this work through them.

But simply knowing the truth about the Holy Spirit will only help you so much. Even more important is receiving its power—having the Holy Spirit at work in your own life! Remember Jesus’ statement that the disciples would “receive power.” That promise did not apply only to the original apostles, it is available to anyone called by God who pursues it!

The Holy Spirit is the ultimate source of power and inspiration. You must take advantage of it if you want to serve God.

Yet there are qualifiers for receiving it. Acts 5:32 speaks of “the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to them that obey Him.” While the Spirit will empower you to keep God’s commandments like never before, you must do your best to obey God even before receiving it.

Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, added more parameters for receiving this special gift: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). “Repent” simply means to change. Mark 1:15 shows that we must also “believe the gospel.”

Space does not allow us to go over everything involved with baptism, repentance and belief in the true gospel. To learn much more, read our free booklet *What Is True Conversion?* at rcg.org/witc. □



LONELINESS.

The U.S. Surgeon General warned that chronic loneliness is as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes per day and is costing the nation billions.

BY JAMES E. HABBOUSH

WHEN YOU think of the surgeon general, your mind likely goes to health warnings on cigarette packs or beer cans telling women how alcohol can affect pregnancies. Yet in May, the nation's lead doctor revealed a new public health epidemic: loneliness.

About half of U.S. adults say they have experienced loneliness, Dr. Vivek Murthy wrote in an 81-page report from his office.

"We now know that loneliness is a common feeling that many people experience. It's like hunger or thirst. It's a feeling the body sends us when something we need for survival is missing," Dr. Murthy told *The Associated Press* in an interview. "Millions of people in America are struggling in the shadows, and that's not right. That's why I issued this

advisory to pull back the curtain on a struggle that too many people are experiencing."

Research shows that many Americans, who have become less engaged with church congregations, community organizations and even their own family members in recent decades, have steadily reported increased feelings of loneliness. The number of single households has also doubled over the last 60 years.

The crisis deeply worsened when COVID-19 spread, prompting schools and workplaces to shut their doors and sending millions of Americans to isolate at home away from family and friends.

The surgeon general's report found that people culled their friend groups during the pandemic and reduced time spent with friends. Americans spent about 20 minutes a day in person with

friends in 2020, down from 60 minutes daily nearly two decades earlier.

The loneliness epidemic is hitting young people ages 15 to 24 especially hard. This age group reported a 70 percent drop in time spent with friends during the same period.

The God of the Bible designed human beings to be social. He knew loneliness could be a huge problem for us, which is why He said this about the first person, Adam: "It is *not good* that the man should be alone..." (Gen. 2:18). God then created Eve as a companion.

It is truly "not good" for *anyone* to feel chronically alone. The health risks make this clear.

Loneliness increases the risk of premature death by nearly 30 percent, with the report revealing that those with poor social relationships also had a greater

risk of stroke and heart disease. Isolation also elevates a person's likelihood of experiencing depression, anxiety and dementia, according to the research.

As the nation grapples with its loneliness epidemic, individuals must cope with this very real health threat in their own lives. Thankfully, God did not just state that it is not good for us to be alone—He also provides ways to combat it in His Word.

Not Alone in Being Alone

Recognizing the scope of the problem can provide a degree of relief. Far from being alone in the battle, billions are grappling with the same feelings.

Many of the greatest servants in the Bible struggled with loneliness.

Elijah the prophet, crying out to God when being pursued by enemies, felt utterly alone: "And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and slain Your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (1 Kgs. 19:14).

Here was a man "jealous" for God, which means *zealous* in modern English. He was committed to living God's Way and consequently felt alone while being persecuted.

Yet God explained Elijah was *not* alone—others of like mind also sought to worship the true God: "I have left Me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal..." (vs. 18).

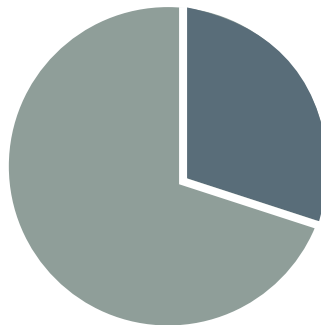
Similarly, King David pleaded with God about feelings of isolation: "Turn You unto me, and have mercy upon me; for I am *desolate* and afflicted. The troubles of my heart are enlarged: O bring You me out of my distresses. Look upon my affliction and my pain; and forgive all my sins" (Psa. 25:16-18).

A plaintive cry to be spared from "desolation"—the Hebrew means *loneliness*—is far from the image that likely comes to mind when meditating on one of God's most famous servants. Yet David was not immune from such affliction.

In Psalm 102, the writer asked God to consider his pitiful state: "Hear my prayer, O LORD, and let my cry come unto You. Hide not Your face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline Your ear unto me: in the day when I call answer me speedily. For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as a hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread. By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin" (vs. 1-5).

30%

**INCREASE IN RISK
OF PREMATURE DEATH
FROM LONELINESS.**



SOURCE: AP

The following two verses poetically describe the pangs of isolation: "I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert. I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top" (vs. 6-7).

Realize that God recorded these prayers so they would comfort us when we feel alone—and they also reveal that crying out in prayer is a crucial way to cope with isolation.

Jesus Christ Himself endured the greatest loneliness. He was God in the flesh—battling sin, yet never failing—setting a perfect example. He had friends, but no one who could fully appreciate what He was doing for mankind: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised, and we esteemed Him not" (Isa 53:3).

Never forget that you are in good company with these Bible figures when feeling lonely. These and other passages offer glimpses of individuals struggling with isolation—and many of the Psalms reveal how they processed those feelings. The book of Psalms is excellent Bible study material when you feel lonely.

Focus on Others

We can find another way to combat loneliness by studying a central theme of the Bible. Jesus Christ taught the GIVE way of life, as explained by the apostle Paul. He told the leaders in Ephesus, "I have shown you all things, how that so laboring you ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, *It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (Acts 20:35).

After recognizing that others are lonely too, it becomes easier to focus on their needs. Helping alleviate their suffering can bring mutual benefit—easing the loneliness of both parties.

The apostle James also encourages us to focus on those in need: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (Jms. 1:27).

The latter half of the verse speaks to another, less-understood facet of tackling loneliness—keeping God's Law. This is at the very heart of focusing on others.

The GIVE way is based on love *toward* God and others. Jesus summarized the Law this way: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39).

In other words, we should focus on *others*—chiefly God but also fellow man. Jesus went on to explain that "on these two commandments hang *all the law and the prophets*" (vs. 40). God's Law—His Way—shows us how to interact with others and thus how to combat loneliness.

Put simply, less focus on *self* and more emphasis on *others* can break the vicious cycle. While challenging, looking outwardly instead of inwardly inherently destroys loneliness.

The Right Company

Some approaches to escaping loneliness are wrong. Paul warned in I Corinthians 15: “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’” (vs. 33, New King James Version). While slipping into a friend group may be easy, it may be the *wrong* choice!

How we choose to spend our time—and with whom we spend it—will influence who we become.

The early Church, after its inception on Pentecost, “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and *fellowship*... continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house...eat[ing] their meat with gladness and singleness of heart” (Acts 2:42, 46). God’s Church today is still a tight-knit group of like-minded individuals seeking to please God but also *fellowshipping* with one another.

Fellowship—positive interaction with others—is the ultimate antidote to loneliness. If we are seeking to live correctly, “we walk in the light, as He [God] is in the light [and] we have fellowship one with another” (I John 1:7). Such fellowship can be found in His Church today. Read *Where Is God’s Church?* at rcg.org/wigtc to learn more.

Earlier in the chapter, John added, “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us [other true Christians]: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (vs. 3).

Even if they do not yet realize it, the ultimate goal of every human being is to have fellowship with God. He desires this for every person on Earth now—and anyone who has ever existed!

Beyond seeking friendship and Christian fellowship, other concrete steps can be taken to pull yourself out of loneliness.

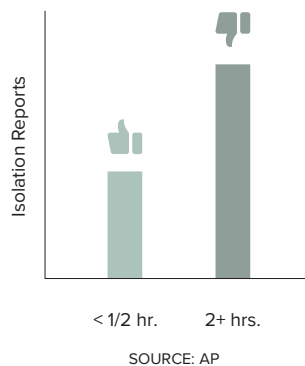
Volunteering, playing sports, visiting a housebound relative or neighbor—

anything that forces interaction with others—can be an effective antidote. So long as this is not done with the “wrong company” to loosely cite Paul, it can provide relief. Search online for community service groups in your area. These activities will invariably bring joy to others but also to you as the giver.

The internet is a helpful way to connect with others, but be careful not to rely on it too much to solve loneliness. One study cited in the surgeon general’s report found that people who

2+

**HOURS ON SOCIAL MEDIA
LED TO TWICE THE
REPORTS OF ISOLATION.**



used social media for two hours or more daily were more than twice as likely to report feeling socially isolated than those using such apps for less than 30 minutes a day.

Dr. Murthy said social media in particular is driving the increase in loneliness. His report recommends that technology companies roll out protections for children.

“There’s really no substitute for in-person interaction,” Dr. Murthy said. “As we shifted to use technology more and more for our communication, we lost out on a lot of that in-person interaction. How do we design technology that strengthens our relationships as opposed to weaken them?”

Permanently Defeating Loneliness

Will the world ever find a lasting solution to loneliness?

In the U.S. surgeon general’s plan of action, he calls on workplaces, schools, technology companies, community organizations, parents and others to make changes to boost the country’s connectedness. He advises people to join community groups and put down their phones when catching up with friends, employers to think carefully about their remote work policies, and health systems to train doctors to recognize the health risks of loneliness.

These are all noble efforts, but they will not eradicate loneliness once and for all.

In Psalm 68, God describes Himself as a “Father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows” and the one who “sets the solitary in families” (vs. 5-6). Solitary means those who are lonely.

God promises to help those who are lonely now, and He also has a plan to eradicate solitude forever.

Notice these comforting words in Revelation 21: “...the tabernacle of God [will be] with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4).

In the book of Romans, Paul referred to Christ as “the firstborn among *many* brethren” (8:29). As the Father, God’s ultimate goal is for *everyone* to enter His Family. Loneliness will be nonexistent.

Far from being a pie-in-the-sky notion, this was at the heart of what Jesus came to preach. He was “sent” with the commission to “preach the Kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43). John 3:3 further explains that to enter the Kingdom of God, one must be “born again” to enter God’s Family—a place where there is *no loneliness*.

To better understand God’s purpose for every human being and how loneliness will ultimately be vanquished, read David C. Pack’s free book *The Awesome Potential of Man* at rcg.org/tapom. □

PERSONAL

Continued from page 2

(I Thes. 5:21). “Prove” means to put to the test.

The first thing that should be proven is God’s existence. The fallacy of evolution, which attempts to explain away the existence of an all-powerful Creator, has made it difficult for some to completely dismiss lingering doubts. There exists an abundance of well-written literature proving creation is the only explanation for the existence of life and the universe.

My five-part *World to Come* video series “Does God Exist?—Many *Absolute* Proofs!” brings undeniable proof of an all-powerful Creator God. Also, my two-part series “Can a Christian Believe Evolution?” will open your eyes to incredible New Testament proof from Jesus confirming the Genesis Creation account.

Scientists and design engineers prove or test finished products. God also commands us to test Him: “Bring you all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in My house, and prove Me now herewith, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it” (Mal. 3:10). Many have put God to this test and discovered He does what He says.

Finally, consider the example of the Bereans in Acts who “were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and *searched the scriptures daily*, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). The Bereans searched the Bible to prove the apostle Paul’s teachings. This is consistent with I Corinthians 13, which shows love “rejoices in the *truth...believes all things [and] hopes all things [in God’s Word]*” (vs. 6-7).

Prove means to get to the truth of a matter—and then accept that truth with positive assurance. (If you have not yet proven the authority of the Bible, read my booklet *Bible Authority...Can It Be Proven?*)

Rule #4: God’s Word Never Contradicts Itself

Many theologians believe the Bible contradicts itself. And many professing Christians claim the it cannot be taken literally. Such statements expose their ignorance.

God speaks of His consistency, and He is plain: “I am the LORD, I change not” (Mal. 3:6), and “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Archeology and fulfilled prophecy add to the overwhelming evidence that the Bible is never contradictory.

One supposed contradiction is Proverbs 26:4: “*Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like unto him.*” Now read verse 5: “*Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.*” These verses are complementary, not contradictory. Which to do depends on circumstances. Verse 4 tells Christians to not degrade themselves by petty bickering and arguing. Do not debate someone who is obviously trying to stir up contention.

Jesus applied this when teaching in the temple. The chief priests, elders and scribes came to Him, saying, “Tell us, by what authority do You these things?” (Luke 20:2). The temple authorities were not seeking advice or understanding from Christ. They wanted to catch Him condemning Himself.

Jesus responded with another question: “He answered...I will also ask you one thing; and answer Me: the baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; He will say, Why then believed you him not? But and if we say, Of men; all the people will stone us: for they be persuaded that John was a prophet. And they answered, that they could not tell whence it was. And Jesus said to them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things” (Luke 20:3-8).

Politicians cannot be pinned down and Jesus knew not to bite. Had He answered any other way, a war of words would have ensued. But He saw their motive and did not stoop to their level. Knowing a question would stop them

cold, He avoided needless strife by not answering foolish leaders “according to their folly.”

Now Proverbs 26:5—“Answer a fool according to his folly, *lest he be wise in his own conceit.*” Think. In some circumstances, not answering a challenge could cause the questioner to feel he prevailed. One should respond in such cases. You can know which is which.

A good example was Paul’s reaction to the Corinthians when they were being led astray by false apostles. This was *no time for silence*: “Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by my *own countrymen*, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in...the wilderness, in...the sea...among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness” (II Cor. 11:23-27).

Paul made his point. False teachers often boast, and these were. His credentials and sacrifices dwarfed their puny claims.

Proverbs 26:4 and 5 do not contradict each other. Both verses offer wise instruction.

Rule #5: Find Out What the Bible Really Says

Applying this rule usually by itself resolves misunderstandings. Many misconceptions result because the world is blind to the truth of God’s Word. For example, professing Christianity universally teaches that Jesus used parables to make His meaning clearer for the supposed simple minds of the first century. Not so!

Why did Jesus speak in parables? “The disciples said...Why speak You unto them in parables? He answered and said to them, Because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the

Kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given” (Matt. 13:10-11). Why can’t the world understand *this*? Spiritual blindness!

Jesus continued: “For whosoever has, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever has not, from him shall be taken away even that he has. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

“And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which says, By hearing you shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you shall see, and shall not perceive: for this people’s heart is waxed gross [or fat], and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted” (Matt. 13:12-15).

This is fascinating. Jesus explains that because people close their minds, He says He makes sure they stay closed—for now.

Jesus also told His disciples—His Church: “Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which you see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which you hear, and have not heard them” (Matt. 13:16-17).

The world’s opportunity for salvation will come when God calls the masses later. The fact that spiritual blindness may be lifted from *your eyes* should be humbling. God *may* be calling you now. If so, it is the biggest reason you can understand the Bible.

Rule #6: Examine the Context

Context simply means “with text.” Checking context involves reading the text before and after the issue in question. Understanding *context* is vital to grasping the correct *meaning* of scriptures. Context points to the intent of a passage. It generally will answer who, what, when, where, why and how.

It is careless to read out of context, because of statements like “You shall

not surely die” (Gen. 3:4). To determine whether this is true, context is everything. In this case, Satan was deceiving Eve. Checking context takes the reader back to Genesis 2:17, where God told Adam, “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it: for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die.” God’s obvious meaning is you are as good as dead—or you will die in time.

False teachers more easily deceive people who don’t investigate deceptive practices, like taking verses out of context to misapply them. One of the

“God *may* be calling you now. If so, it is the biggest reason you can understand the Bible.”

many benefits of recognizing proper context is that it builds resistance against deception.

Rule #7: “Here a little, there a little”

One verse cannot establish doctrine. A person must gather all scriptures on a subject to see the full picture.

Without God’s Spirit leading you, the door to true understanding is closed. And we saw Jesus used parables to hide meaning from the world at large. This applies to understanding the whole Bible.

God’s Word is written in a way that defies understanding on the physical level. Notice this: “Whom shall He [God] teach knowledge? And whom shall He make to understand doctrine? Them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts [meaning adults]. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; *line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little*” (Isa. 28:9-10).

We must diligently examine verses throughout the entire Bible to gain true knowledge and understand doctrine. This requires being led by God’s Spirit. Continuing, “For with stammering lips and another tongue will He speak to

this people...yet they would not hear” (vs. 11-12). These verses show an intentional hiding of meaning by God, as if it were a foreign language. But Israel also showed a *willful rejection* of the truth—“they would not hear.”

Verse 13 adds, “The word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken [by wrong understanding].” Again, see the unmistakable *hiding* of the meaning.

The next example shows the need to draw from precept upon precept or line upon line. You will see that verses people call contradictory actually supplement each other. Here are four verses critics say demonstrate contradiction about what was written on the stake above Christ’s head.

Matthew 27:37: “Set up over His head His accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

Mark 15:26: “The superscription of His accusation was written over, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

Luke 23:38: “A superscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

John 19:19: “Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

Together, these verses show Pilate did the writing, and that four versions were written in three languages. All four contributions, from four authors, give a complete account. The full picture emerges by assembling “line upon line.” Rather than contradicting scriptures, the four gospels together work in harmony to present a complete understanding.

With just these first seven of the 12 rules of Bible study, you can study with much more understanding. Part 2 will present the final five, along with additional practical points to get more out of God’s Word. Do not miss it. In the meantime, read our free article “Study to Show Yourself Approved” at rcg.org/stsya. □

Uganda Enacts Anti-LGBTQ Law Including Death Penalty



A Ugandan MP wears clothes with an anti-LGBTQ message as he enters the Parliament to vote on the new bill (March 21, 2023).

AP/RONALD KABUUBI

Kampala (Reuters) – Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni has signed one of the world’s toughest anti-LGBTQ laws, including the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality,” drawing Western condemnation and risking sanctions from aid donors.

Same-sex relations were already illegal in Uganda, as in more than 30 African countries, but the new law goes further.

It stipulates capital punishment for “serial offenders” against the law and transmission of a terminal illness like HIV/AIDS through gay sex. It also decrees a 20-year sentence for “promoting” homosexuality.

United States President Joe Biden called the move “a tragic violation” of human rights and said Washington would evaluate the implications of the law “on all aspects of U.S. engagement with Uganda.”

“We are considering additional steps, including the application of sanctions and restriction of entry into the United States against anyone involved in serious human rights abuses or corruption,” he said.

Mr. Museveni has called homosexuality a “deviation from normal” and urged lawmakers to resist “imperialist” pressure.

A local organization, Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum, and 10 other individuals later filed a complaint against the law at the constitutional court, one of the petitioners, Busingye Kabumba, told *Reuters*.

Mr. Museveni had sent the original bill passed in March back, asking parliament to tone down some provisions. But his ultimate approval was not seen as in doubt in a conservative country where anti-LGBTQ attitudes have hardened in recent years, in part

due to campaigning by Western evangelical church groups.

Uganda receives billions of dollars in foreign aid each year and could now face adverse measures from donors and investors, as happened with a similar bill nine years ago.

The bill’s sponsor, Asuman Basalirwa, told reporters that parliament speaker Anita Among’s U.S. visa was canceled after the law was signed.

In a joint statement, the U.S.’s flagship HIV/AIDS program PEPFAR, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) said the law put Uganda’s anti-HIV fight “in grave jeopardy.”

Dominic Arnall, chief executive of Open For Business, a coalition of companies that includes Google and Microsoft, said the group was deeply disappointed and the law ran counter to Ugandans’ economic interests.

The UN human rights body declared itself “appalled.”

Uganda’s move could encourage lawmakers in neighboring Kenya and Tanzania seeking similar measures.

“What a leader we’ve in Africa!” tweeted George Kaluma, a Kenyan member of parliament who submitted an anti-LGBTQ bill in April.

“Kenya is following you in this endeavor to save humanity.”

The inclusion of the death penalty for offenses like transmitting HIV has drawn particular outrage internationally.

Existing Ugandan law calls for a maximum 10-year sentence for intentionally transmitting HIV and does not apply when the person who contracted the infection was aware of their sexual partner’s HIV status.

By contrast, the new law makes no distinction between intentional and unintentional transmission and contains no exception based on awareness of HIV status. □

War, Natural Disasters Left Record 71 Million People Internally Displaced in 2022

The war in Ukraine helped push the global total of people left internally displaced by conflict or natural disasters to a record high of 71.1 million last year, according to a report by the Norwegian Refugee Council's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.

By the end of 2022, 5.9 million people had been forced to move inside Ukraine because of Russia's invasion, bringing the global total of people internally displaced by conflict and violence to more than 62 million, an increase of 17 percent since 2021. Syria had 6.8 million displaced by

conflict after more than a decade of civil war.

The number of people displaced inside their country at the end of the year because of disasters like floods and famine reached 8.7 million, up by 45 percent from 2021.

The total of 71.1 million internally displaced worldwide was a 20 percent increase since 2021.

Internal displacement refers to people forced to move inside their own borders. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre's report did not take into account those who left for different countries.

Following a year when conflict raged in Ukraine, Syria, Ethiopia and elsewhere, there has been no respite in 2023. The United Nations migration agency said over 700,000 people have already been internally displaced in a matter of weeks by the conflict in Sudan between the army and a rival paramilitary group.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre cited the La Nina weather phenomenon, which continued for a third consecutive year in 2022, as a major factor in disaster displacements. It contributed to record levels of flood displacement in Pakistan, Nigeria and Brazil and to the worst drought on record in Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia.

There was a "perfect storm" of conflict and natural disasters in 2022, leading to "displacement on a scale never seen before," said Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council. □



Internally displaced people board a train at the Pokrovsk train station in eastern Ukraine (July 8, 2022).

AP/NARIMAN EL-MOFTY

Syria and Iran Sign Long-term Oil and Trade Agreements



Syrian President Bashar Assad, right, shakes hands with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Damascus, Syria (May 3, 2023).

AP/OMAR SANADIKI

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) – The presidents of Iran and Syria signed a series of long-term cooperation agreements on oil and other sectors to bolster economic ties between the two allies.

Iran's Ebrahim Raisi, leading a large economic and political delegation, met with his Syrian counterpart, Bashar Assad, after landing in the war-torn country for a two-day visit—an Iranian president's first visit to Damascus since 2010.

Tehran has been a main backer of Mr. Assad's government since a 2011 uprising turned into full-blown civil war and has played an instrumental

role in turning the tide of the conflict in his favor.

Iran has sent scores of military advisers and thousands of Iran-backed fighters from around the Middle East to Syria to fight on Mr. Assad's side. Tehran has also been an economic lifeline for Mr. Assad, sending fuel and credit lines worth billions of dollars.

Syrian government forces have regained control of large parts of the country in recent years, with the help of its two main allies—Russia and Iran.

With Arab governments that once advocated Mr. Assad's downfall now slowly making amends with Damascus, Iran appears to be hoping

to reap the rewards for its decades-long support of the Syrian president with investment and economic opportunities to help alleviate its own ailing economy.

Syrian state media said Mr. Raisi and Mr. Assad signed agreements and memorandums of understanding related to several sectors, including oil, agriculture, railways and free trade zones.

Iran's state-owned railway company has long aspired to expand its network through neighboring Iraq and Syria, linking it to the Syrian port of Lattakia on the Mediterranean Sea to boost trade. Syria's opposition and Tehran

critics see this as another Iran attempt at growing its political influence.

The deal is important also for Syria, whose economy has hit an all-time low over the past decade, with spiraling inflation, a currency plunge and rampant power cuts.

In an interview with pan-Arab television channel *Al Mayadeen* ahead of his visit, Mr. Raisi called for reconstruction efforts and for Syrian refugees who fled the country's war to return home.

"Syria's government and people have gone through great hardship," Syrian state media quoted Mr. Raisi as telling Mr. Assad during their meeting. "Today, we can now say that you have overcome all these problems and were victorious, despite the threats and sanctions imposed against you."

Mr. Raisi was also to visit the Sayida Zeinab and Sayida Ruqayya shrines, both holy sites in Shiite Islam, as well as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a monument dedicated to Syrian soldiers killed in battle.

The last Iranian president to visit Syria was President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2010.

Mr. Raisi's visit comes as some Arab countries, including Egypt and regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia, have been opening up to Mr. Assad and their foreign ministers have visited Damascus in recent weeks. Syria's foreign minister also visited the Saudi capital of Riyadh in April, the first such visit since the two countries cut relations in 2012.

In March, Iran and Saudi Arabia, a main backer of Syrian opposition fighters, reached an agreement, brokered by China, to reestablish diplomatic relations and reopen embassies after seven years of tensions.

The Iran-Saudi reconciliation is likely to have positive effects on countries where the two fought proxy wars, including Syria.

Syria was widely shunned by Arab governments over Mr. Assad's

brutal crackdown on protesters. The breakdown in relations culminated with Syria being ousted from the Arab League in 2011. Syria's civil war has since killed nearly half a million people and displaced half of the country's pre-war population of 23 million.

"America and its allies failed on all fronts against the resistance, and could not achieve any of their goals," Iran's new ambassador to Syria, Hossein Akbari, told Iran's state news agency.

Like Syria, Iran is under Western sanctions, which alongside decades of mismanagement, has plunged its national currency to new lows. Months of anti-government protests failed to unseat the ruling clerics and talks on Tehran's return to the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, which lifted sanctions in exchange for restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, have long become stalemated.

In 2015, when the nuclear deal was signed, Iran's currency was trading at 32,000 rials to the dollar. In February, it hit a record low of 600,000 for \$1.

A week before the Iranian president's visit to Damascus, Iran's minister of road and urban development, Mehrdad Bazrpash, met with Mr. Assad in the Syrian capital, where he delivered a message from Mr. Raisi supporting the expansion of ties, Iran's state *IRNA* news agency said.

Iran's military presence in Syria has been a major concern for Israel, which has vowed to stop Iranian entrenchment along its northern border. Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets in government-controlled parts of Syria in recent years, but rarely acknowledges them.

Since the beginning of 2023, Syrian officials have attributed a dozen strikes on Syrian territory to Israel, the latest of which came in May and put the international airport of the northern city of Aleppo out of service. □

One-third of U.S. Nurses Plan to Quit Profession

Almost a third of the nurses in the United States are considering leaving their profession after the COVID-19 pandemic left them overwhelmed and fatigued, according to a survey.

The survey of over 18,000 nurses, conducted by AMN Healthcare Services Inc. in January, showed that 30 percent of the participants are looking to quit their career, up 7 percentage points over 2021, when the pandemic-triggered wave of resignations began.

The survey also showed that 36 percent of the nurses plan to continue working in the sector but may change workplaces.

"This really underscores the continued mental health and well-being challenges the nursing workforce experiences post-pandemic," AMN Healthcare CEO Cary Grace told *Reuters* in an interview.

The survey showed there are various changes needed, with 69 percent of nurses seeking increased salaries and 63 percent of them seeking a safer working environment to reduce their stress.

This comes at a time hospital operator and sector bellwether HCA Healthcare Inc. indicated a recovery in their staffing situation.

While a shortage of staff in hospitals has been an issue for a couple of years, it gained traction globally in late 2021 and hit a peak early last year following a large number of resignations due to burnout.

The staffing crisis drove up costs at hospital operators while boosting profits at medical staffing providers. □

Repelled by High Car Prices, Americans Are Holding On to Their Vehicles Longer Than Ever

ANN ARBOR, Mich. (AP) – With new and used cars still painfully expensive, Ryan Holdsworth says he plans to keep his 9-year-old Chevy Cruze for at least four more years. Limiting his car payments and his overall debt is a bigger priority for him than having a new vehicle.

A 35-year-old grocery store worker from Grand Rapids, Michigan, Mr. Holdsworth would probably be in the market for a vehicle within a few years—if not for the high cost. For now, it is out of the question.

“You’re not going to get one for a price you can afford,” he said.

Mr. Holdsworth has plenty of company. Americans are keeping their cars longer than ever. The average age of a passenger vehicle on the road hit a record 12.5 years this year, according to data gathered by S&P Global Mobility. Sedans like Mr. Holdsworth’s are even older, on average—13.6 years.

Blame it mainly on the pandemic, which in 2020 triggered a global shortage of automotive computer chips, the vital component that runs everything from radios to gas pedals to transmissions. The shortage drastically slowed global assembly lines, making new vehicles scarce on dealer lots just when consumers were increasingly eager to buy.

Prices reached record highs. And though they have eased somewhat, the cost of a vehicle still feels punishingly expensive to many Americans, especially when coupled with now much-higher loan rates.

Since the pandemic struck three years ago, the average new vehicle has rocketed 24 percent to nearly \$48,000 as of April, according to Edmunds.

com. Typical loan rates on new-car purchases have ballooned to 7 percent, a consequence of the Federal Reserve’s aggressive streak of interest rate hikes to fight inflation.

This has all pushed the national average monthly auto loan payment to \$729—prohibitively high for many. Experts say a family earning the median U.S. household income can no longer afford the average new car payment and still cover such necessities as housing, food and utilities.

Used vehicle prices, on average, have surged even more since the pandemic hit—up 40 percent, to nearly \$29,000. With an average loan rate having reached 11 percent, the typical monthly used-vehicle payment is now \$563.

Faced with deciding between making a jumbo payment and keeping their existing vehicles, more owners are choosing to stick with what they have, even if it means spending more on repairs and maintenance.

Auto mechanics have been struck by the rising ages and mileages of vehicles that now arrive at the shop in numbers they have never seen before.

“You see cars all the time in here with 250,000, 300,000 miles,” said Jay Nuber, owner of Japanese Auto Professional Service, a repair garage near downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan. “They haven’t been really having major work or anything. They’ve just been doing the [routine] service.”

It does not mean that most owners of older vehicles are necessarily stuck with constant repair bills. One reason people can hold their vehicles for increasingly long periods is that auto manufacturing has improved over time. Engines run longer. Bodies



do not rust as quickly. Components last longer.

Yet the cost of buying either a new or used vehicle is leaving more people with essentially no choice but to keep the one they have.

“The repair-versus-buy equation changed,” said Todd Campau, an associate director with S&P. Even with rising repair costs, Mr. Campau said, it’s still typically more cost-effective to fix an older vehicle than to spring for a purchase.

The average vehicle age, which has been edging up since 2019, accelerated this year by a substantial three months. And while 12.5 years is the average, Mr. Campau noted, more vehicles are staying on the road for 20 years or more, sometimes with three or four successive owners.

In such cases, the third or fourth owner is getting a much older car than



An auto mechanic stands at a workbench at Gates Automotive Service in Louisville, Kentucky. (Jan. 13, 2022).

JON CHERRY/GETTY IMAGES

they would have in the past. Nearly 122 million vehicles on the road are more than a dozen years old, Mr. Campau said. S&P predicts that the number of older vehicles will keep growing until at least 2028.

Even with more durable vehicles able to last longer, all of this has created a boom time for auto shops. Through most of last year, Mr. Nuber's Japanese Auto was overwhelmed with customers. It took up to three weeks to get an appointment, whether for repairs or the routine maintenance that older vehicles, in particular, require.

"The phone just kept ringing, and the cars just kept coming," Mr. Nuber said.

It is now at the point where some vehicle owners must decide whether to pay for a repair that costs more than their vehicle is worth. That is where

many of them draw the line, said Dave Weber, manager at Japanese Auto.

Recently, Mr. Weber said, one customer needed rear brakes, wheel bearings and exhaust system repairs. The customer decided to do only half the repairs and wait until later to decide whether to sink more money into the aging vehicle.

"They patch them up and drive them for however long, until the next major repair," Mr. Weber said.

S&P predicts that U.S. new vehicle sales will reach 14.5 million this year, up from about 13.9 million last year. A big reason is that the supply at dealerships is finally growing. Automakers have also begun to restore some discounts that had long helped keep a lid on prices. The result is that many people who can afford to buy can now do so. It is a trend

that could slow the advancing age of the U.S. fleet and boost overall sales.

Still, no one is predicting a return to pre-pandemic annual sales of around 17 million anytime soon. Even with discounts, new-vehicle prices are likely to stay much higher than pre-pandemic levels for years to come.

As for Mr. Holdsworth, the Chevy Cruze owner, he plans to keep up with the scheduled maintenance on his car, especially routine oil changes. Even if he encountered a major repair, he thinks he would probably pay for it.

Having bought his vehicle two years ago, Mr. Holdsworth has about two years of payments left. So his Cruze, too, may reach the 12.5-year-old national average.

"I'll finish paying it off," he said, "and drive it for a couple more years." □

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