

Relax! This Pandemic Is Not the End of the World

I get a new message in my inbox every day telling me why I should be terrified to walk outside. Network news is depressing enough, with reports of rising crime, inflation, unbridled government spending and, of course, another new strain of the coronavirus. But many Christians I know send me alarming reports describing conspiracies and sinister plots. These conspiracy theories usually go like this:

- The COVID-19 vaccine was engineered by the government (and/or pharmaceutical companies) to kill us.
- The coronavirus is not really a virus but is caused by radiation from new 5G cell phone towers.
- Bill Gates and George Soros are using the vaccine to plant a microchip in our brains to control us and to create a New World Order.
- People who take the COVID-19 vaccine become "magnetic." (One creative fearmonger in Africa made a video showing people holding keys and other metal objects against their arms, claiming the vaccines magnetized their skin.)
- A secret group of politicians, business tycoons and Hollywood celebrities have banded together to worship Satan and abuse children sexually. (This conspiracy is better known as QAnon; many of its followers believed President Trump would save us from the satanic elites.)
- During the darkest days of 2020, Pastor Dana Coverstone of Kentucky released videos claiming that God had shown him in dreams that the United States was about to descend into civil war. He advised people to stock up on food and alternative currencies because banks would collapse.

Some Christians call me naïve because I didn't buy these or other worrisome theories. Go ahead and criticize me if you want, but so far (1) there's no microchip in my body; (2) 5G radiation has no affect on me; (3) I don't waste one minute of my day worrying about Bill Gates; (4) my body shows no evidence of being magnetized; and (5) I'd rather read my Bible than waste time fretting about what Satanists are doing.

P.S. I also believe the world is round.

I know we are going through a stressful time. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an estimated million deaths worldwide. The lockdowns, masking policies, social distancing and closing of schools and businesses have triggered violence, anxiety and suicides—and the second and third waves of COVID-19 variants have pushed us all to our limits.

But I'm still sleeping soundly each night because I enjoy the peace of God. Here are four reasons why I'm not worried about the future:

1. History shows that bad times don't last forever. This isn't the first time the world has faced a pandemic. Be glad you didn't live through the Black Death of 1350, when 25 million people died—one-third of Europe's population. Between 20 and 50 million died during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1920; sadly, many victims were young children.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been horrific, but when compared to previous health disasters, we should be grateful for the blessings of medical technology, easy sharing of information and better health protocols. Pandemics don't last forever. When you read history, you realize that people bounce back after hard times.

2. God has not given us a spirit of fear. The most common command in the Bible is, "Fear not." Those exact words appear in the New International Version of the Bible 70 times. I've looked at the fruit of conspiracy theories, and it's not good.

Why focus on something that only stirs up anxiety?

British preacher Charles Spurgeon said: "The fear of God is the death of every other fear; like a mighty lion, it chases all fears before it." Focusing on the devil's work is depressing. I choose to keep my eyes on Jesus during this crisis.

3. God is on the throne, not evil people. Since the pandemic began, I've been parked in Psalm 2, a passage that proclaims God's sovereignty over men and nations. It acknowledges that evil men have indeed conspired to rule the earth, but it says God will overrule them. "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord," verse 2 says. But it goes on: "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord ridicules them" (v. 4).

I'm not worried about George Soros, Bill Gates, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Hillary Clinton or leaders in China, North Korea or the Middle East. Regardless of what any of these people are plotting, the Bible says God will deal with those who oppose Him. Men are ultimately not in charge of this earth. No matter how much money or power evil men have, God will always have the last word.

4. My security is in the Lord. Don't let silly rumors steal your faith. God is saying to us today, "Don't fear what everyone else fears." Our God is victorious! He's not worried about a pandemic. His throne is immovable. He's not wringing His hands over socialist liberals, right-wing zealots, tyrants, 5G towers or pharmaceutical companies. The deep state, if it exists, is not a threat to the Lord.

God is big enough and strong enough to take care of His enemies. He's laughing. He knows how things will end. Trust God, and get a good night's rest.

How Religion Chokes the Life Out of the Church

On many occasions I have preached in churches where I saw the same peculiar vision while standing in the pulpit. I saw in my spirit many tangled and gnarly roots growing up from the floor of the building and wrapping themselves around the chairs and walls. The roots covered the doors, the stage, the pulpit and even the ceiling. It appeared as though these invasive roots were choking the very life out of the house of God.

I have come to know that what I was seeing was evidence of a spirit of religion. And in each case, I understood it as a warning—because the life of the Holy Spirit cannot flourish in a church that is controlled by this cold, dark deadness.

Of all the enemies of Jesus, dead religion is the worst. Religion opposes biblical preaching, resists the Holy Spirit, persecutes those who truly love God and turns vibrant faith into empty formalism. And most of all, it sterilizes churches until they die from barrenness.

The apostle Paul warned Timothy that the time would come when people who claim to know Christ would “[hold] to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (2 Tim. 3:5a, NASB). Religion looks good on the outside. Religious people sing nice songs about God, recite nice prayers, dress in nice clothes to listen to nice sermons and even give money to build nice religious buildings. But it can all be a show that is devoid of life.

And when the Holy Spirit comes to bring new life to the church, and to revive us from the deadness of the past season, we must break free from the control of a religious spirit. We

are in this season now. The Spirit wants to blow His refreshing wind into our barrenness. When He does, the dead roots and brittle branches in our churches will be pruned away—and supernatural fruit will appear.

Have you been infected by dead religion? You can take your own test by examining these eight characteristics of a religious person:

Religious people view God as a cold, harsh, distant taskmaster rather than an approachable, loving Father. When we base our relationship with God on our ability to perform spiritual duties, we deny the power of grace. God does not love us because we pray, read our Bibles, attend church or witness, yet millions of Christians struggle to find true intimacy with Jesus because they are enslaved to performance religion. Discover His amazing mercy and cultivate closeness with God.

Religious people do outward things to prove that God accepts them. Some Christians believe their dress codes, spiritual disciplines, music styles or even certain doctrinal positions make them better than others. I knew of one church that taught that people who wear wedding rings aren't saved! Another denomination taught that women should not wear their hair short. Such religious rules ostracize people and turn Christians into unhappy legalists.

Religious people develop traditions and formulas to accomplish spiritual goals. We trust in our liturgies, denominational policies or man-made programs to obtain results that only God alone can give. Formalism chokes out the work of the Holy Spirit. If we want the life of the Spirit, we will sing a new song, preach a fresh word and experience fresh fire each time we gather.

Religious people become joyless, cynical and hypercritical. This can turn a church completely sour. When religion takes over a church, love turns cold, smiles turn into frowns and

church members gossip about each other. And visitors won't feel welcome in that environment!

Religious people develop a harsh, judgmental attitude toward sinners, yet those who ingest this poison typically struggle with sinful habits that they cannot admit to anyone else. Religious people rail against the evils of society but rarely notice their own flaws. And their pharisaical attitude makes it impossible for them to show true mercy.

Religious people refuse to embrace change. This is why many churches become irrelevant to society. They become so focused on what God did 50 or 100 years ago that they become stuck in a time warp and cannot move forward when the Holy Spirit begins to open new understanding. When a church refuses to shift with God's new directives, it can become an "old wineskin" (Mark 2:22), so God must find more flexible vessels that are willing to follow the Holy Spirit.

Religious people persecute those who disagree with their self-righteous views. An angry religious person will even use slander to assassinate other peoples' character. You would be shocked by the kind of behavior professing Christians are capable of when they are driven by a religious spirit.

Religious people will not see conversions. Sinners will rarely find Jesus in a toxic religious environment. When religion takes over a church, fewer and fewer people visit the altar, and the baptismal tank stays dry. The congregation ages; there are no children in the nursery, and eventually the church closes. Religion is deadly.

If the poisonous tendrils of religion have contaminated your walk with God, ask Him to pour a fresh understanding of His grace into your barren spirit—and then expect His new life to flow through you. Let's welcome the fresh wind of God that comes to breathe new life into our barren churches. {eoa}

Still Single? This Advice Might Help You Find a Mate

This past weekend I went to Seattle to help perform the wedding of my friends Mehari and Selam, two immigrants from Eritrea who fell in love only recently. They met remotely—not on a dating site, but during a Zoom Bible study hosted by an Eritrean pastor from California during the pandemic.

Their wedding was a lavish, two-day affair that included colorful Eritrean costumes, drumming, lots of dancing and several feasts. But Mehari and Selam wanted Jesus to be the center of the celebration because they know He's the one who brought them together. They wanted all their single friends to know it's possible for two people in their 30s to find each other.

I meet lots of singles these days who are anxious about their dating prospects. The clock is ticking, and they wonder if God is still in the matchmaking business. I always assure them that He is—but that there are some things they can do to get in the position to find a mate. If you want to be married, here are some steps that might help move you further along in the process:

- **Make sure Jesus is on the throne of your life.** You can never go wrong when you put God first. Matthew 6:33 (NASB) says: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided to you." Marriage is a need, and God is eager to meet it. And since it is the biggest decision you'll ever make, why trust your own instincts to choose the right person? Ask the Lord to guide you.
- **Make spiritual growth your priority.** A marriage is strong

when both the husband and the wife are strong Christians. If either is immature spiritually, problems will multiply. That's why you should spend your single years becoming a mature disciple. Paul told the Corinthians that single believers should pursue "undistracted devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35b). Get involved in a church, study God's Word and become a passionate worshipper.

– **Make a list of your relationship preferences.** It's OK to desire certain qualities in a spouse. Maybe you prefer a girl who is short, a guy who is older than you or someone who has a certain educational background. Psalm 37:4 says: "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart." Just check your motives and make sure your desires are not selfish or unrealistic.

– **Get rid of your false expectations and fantasies.** Many singles have totally unrealistic ideas about what marriage and romance are all about. Some girls have been conditioned by Disney cartoons to expect a guy to sweep them off their feet and take them to his fairy tale castle. That's not going to happen. Neither will you ever feel the level of heartthrob described in romance novels. Pornography has also ruined romance for people; some guys who are addicted to porn can't even experience normal arousal without it. Come down to earth and get real. Marriage will never resemble your perfect dream world.

– **Set your moral standards high and never sell out.** Every unmarried Christian needs a list of non-negotiables. Never compromise your sexual purity. If a sweet-talking guy from your church's worship team tries to lure you into a one-night stand, refuse his charm. If you feel attracted to a girl and then realize she flirts with every guy and doesn't share your values, back off. And never date a nonbeliever with the intention of converting them.

– **Get busy with your life and career.** The worst thing any

single can do is sit around waiting for a mate. Moping is not attractive. Don't be desperate. God loves you just the way you are, and you don't need a husband or wife to make you valuable. Live your life. Finish your education, achieve your professional goals and get involved in ministry. It's more likely you will find your mate while pursuing your dreams than while sitting in a corner mourning your singleness. (And remember: Love does not pay the bills. You need a job to be married!)

– **Seek emotional healing.** I know singles who jump from one dysfunctional dating relationship to the next and never realize they have serious issues to address. Don't wait until you are married to realize you have addictions, bitterness or unresolved pain. If you don't get rid of your drama now, your marriage will be filled with drama. Seek prayer ministry at your church or find a counselor.

– **Take care of yourself physically.** You don't have to be a cover girl or a GQ stud to find a mate. We come in all shapes and sizes, and your spouse is going to love you the way you are. But making yourself more attractive doesn't hurt. If you always look like you just got out of bed, ask some honest friends to give you a makeover. If you need to lose weight, stop making excuses and start a sensible food plan and exercise routine.

– **Develop an active social life.** Some Christian guys I know are afraid to ask a girl out for coffee, yet they play video games all day while complaining about loneliness. You will never find a mate in a vacuum. You have to break out of your shell and make yourself available. You don't have to pair up when you gather with a group of singles for fellowship. Many dating relationships start as innocent friendships—and then a romantic spark turns into a flame.

– **Find a married mentor to help you prepare.** You don't have to navigate the journey from dating to marriage all by yourself.

Seek out a trusted older friend to help you. Ask questions. Share your fears. Marriage is a huge decision, but a mentor can give you the courage to embrace your future. And they will be cheering the loudest at your wedding because they've played a small part in God's miracle.

When I saw Mehari and Selam standing together at the church altar last weekend I was reminded again that God is in the business of putting the right people together. He loves marriage because He created it! You don't have to be anxious about it. Psalm 37:5 says: "Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He will do it." {eoa}

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An Urgent Plea to Pray for the Nations

So many Americans live in a comfortable bubble. We enjoy first-world benefits, even in the midst of a pandemic. We complain when our steaks aren't cooked right, when the internet is slow, when flights are crowded or when our Amazon packages don't arrive in two days. We are spoiled because we are so ignorant about how the rest of the world lives.

One way I resist this smug entitlement is by praying for those

who are less fortunate than I am. And there has never been a better time for us to remember people who are struggling. If you think 2021 is difficult, multiply your hardships by five or 10 times, and you can better imagine how life is elsewhere.

Below is a list of nations I'm praying for regularly, with a brief explanation of the problems they face. Please join me.

Afghanistan. Insiders report that a wave of persecution against Christians began as soon as U.S. troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan a few weeks ago. A dozen leaders of the underground house church movement there have reportedly been martyred, and thousands of orphans are in danger of being sold into jihad sex slavery. Observers fear that if the Taliban regains control of Afghanistan, women will be forced to wear burkas, and girls will be pulled out of school. Pray for protection of the church and freedom for the Afghan people.

Cuba. After Cuban citizens took to the streets in early July to demand an end to communism, government forces loyal to Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez arrested hundreds of freedom activists. The government also shut down the internet, cutting off communication so protesters would be isolated. Pray for the suffering church in Cuba, and pray that freedom will replace tyranny.

Haiti. The July 7 assassination of Haiti's president, Jovenal Moise, is only one of many problems plaguing the small island nation. Haiti never recovered from the 2010 earthquake that destroyed the capital, and rival gangs took over large sectors of the country during Moise's term. Today the country is under martial law, while its broken health care system is unable to handle the COVID-19 pandemic. The people of this country are in despair.

Nigeria. Africa's most populous country is experiencing a deadly wave of violence. In the northern part of the country, Muslim terrorists are burning churches, killing villagers and

kidnapping students. In other regions, bandits and militants are killing Nigerian soldiers and robbing local residents. In April 2021 alone, 600 civilians were killed, and armed groups abducted 406 people. Pray for God's peace in this troubled nation.

South Africa. The worst violence to hit South Africa in years erupted in mid-July after former president Jacob Zuma was jailed on corruption charges. Warehouses, malls and other stores have been stripped by looters, cars have been burned and up to 212 people have died in violent skirmishes. And in the midst of the violence, a second wave of the coronavirus has been spreading. Pray for racial healing and an intervention of peace.

India. Researchers now believe that between 3 and 4 million people have died of COVID-19 in India, far above the government's official count. If true, this would make the pandemic the biggest tragedy in India since it gained independence from Great Britain in 1947. Funeral pyres burn around the clock in India's large cities, and bodies of dead victims have been washing up on the edges of the River Ganges. Pray for a spiritual intervention in this broken nation.

Indonesia. The world's fourth most populous country is now facing a deadly second wave of COVID-19, and the deaths include many pastors who leave their troubled flocks behind. After the delta variant of the virus spread from India, the Red Cross announced that Indonesia is "on the edge of a COVID-19 catastrophe." In July more than 30,000 new cases were being reported each day, and patients with breathing problems have limited access to oxygen. Pray for an end to this pandemic.

Lebanon. Some Lebanese people have declared their nation officially "unlivable." The people suffer from hyperinflation, gasoline and power shortages and lack of medicines. The country has been without a government since the massive

explosion of a warehouse full of ammonium nitrate on Aug. 4, 2020. More than 6,000 people were injured in that disaster at the Port of Beirut, and 211 died. The cabinet of Prime Minister Hassan Diab resigned after the incident. Pray for peace and supernatural recovery for Lebanon.

Venezuela. This once-prosperous nation is now an unimaginable disaster. Venezuela's debt is more than double the size of its economy. About 95% of Venezuelans live in poverty. The national inflation rate is 6,500%. And because of the pandemic, the supply line is broken, and people cannot get food, water, fuel or medicine. Pray for a miracle of deliverance for the Venezuelan people.

Let's pray: *Lord Jesus, deliver this world from evil. Bring Your peace where there is chaos. Bring Your provision where there is hunger. Bring Your freedom where there is tyranny. Bring Your comfort where there is despair. May Your kingdom come and Your will be done. Amen. {eoa}*

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5 Steps to Find Healing From the Shame of Abuse

When I was a boy, something shameful happened to me that I never planned to talk about publicly. During a visit to a

summer youth camp in Alabama, an older boy whom I considered a friend took me into the woods and abused me sexually. He then brought me inside a boathouse near the camp's lake for more experimentation.

The abuse wasn't penetrative or physically painful, but it inflicted a deep emotional scar. It was as if my 7-year-old soul had been branded with a hot iron. I never talked about the incident with anyone after it happened. I buried the trauma, but the pain didn't go away.

I was glad when my family moved from Alabama so I would never have to see that camp again. Yet the memory followed me like a phantom. It produced self-loathing, fear of exposure and deep inferiority. As a teenager, I spent lots of energy trying to convince my friends I was OK—yet deep down, I still feared I was hopelessly broken.

Thankfully my healing began at age 18, just before college, when I made Jesus the Lord of my life and asked Him to fill me with the Holy Spirit. God stripped layers of shame off me as I heard the Father's voice and experienced His unconditional love. By the time I got married and started a family, the shadow of abuse grew faint.

I found more healing when I told a few mentors and friends about the abuse. I was afraid they would recoil in disgust and reject me (most abuse victims expect that response), but they expressed only love and affirmation. Transparency brought freedom.

Yet a thin layer of shame lingered. Even though I was involved in full-time ministry by that time, I battled nagging thoughts of disqualification. I seemed confident and successful to others, but I didn't like myself.

It would actually take years of healing to finally feel free. It was not an instant miracle. But I can honestly say today that the pain is gone. The faint scar simply reminds me of

what Jesus delivered me from.

A few years ago I was preparing to preach at a men's conference in South Africa. The audience was full of tough, macho guys who seemed very confident, at least on the outside. But the Holy Spirit told me to share my abuse experience and to tell how Jesus had freed me from the shame of that awful trauma.

I wrestled with God about this. How could I stand in front of those men and admit such weakness? What would they think of me? Everything in me wanted to keep my pain hidden—but the Spirit continued urging me to be vulnerable. I finally relented and exposed my dark secret.

At the conclusion of my sermon I gave an opportunity for men to come to the altar for ministry, and a prayer team joined me in front. Many guys responded, and one of the first men I prayed for looked at me with tears in his eyes and said: "What happened to you ... also happened to me." He looked down in shame, and then buried his face in my shoulder and wept. After I prayed for him, other men told me they had endured the same type of abuse. They were tough on the outside, but inside, they were tormented by self-loathing, rejection and depression.

That day I decided I would never hide my scar again. If talking openly about my pain could help one person find healing, I determined I would never care again what anyone thought of me. I want to see people delivered from their pain. If you have experienced any form of sexual, verbal or physical abuse, take the following steps:

- 1. Make sure Jesus is Lord of your life.** If you want to know God's full healing power, you must give Him full control over your life. Adjust your heart by saying to the Lord, "Not my will, but Yours be done" (see Luke 22:42).
- 2. Be filled with the Holy Spirit.** When the Spirit fills us,

He begins the amazing process of “sanctification”—a fancy word for inner transformation. He repairs your wounded soul and rebuilds your damaged emotions, so you can know true joy, peace and love.

3. Share your pain with a trusted friend. James 5:16a (NASB 1995) says: “Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.” Healing requires vulnerability. Even though the abuse you experienced was someone else’s sin, you still need to talk about your pain openly. As long as you hide it, you will be tormented by dark thoughts. You will feel as if tons of spiritual weight has been lifted from your soul when you admit what happened.

4. Receive prayer for healing. Ask a mature Christian to pray that you will be free from all the effects of shame—including rejection, self-loathing, condemnation, unworthiness and inferiority. You must accept the fact that God loves you no matter what happened to you. He does not view you as “damaged” or “stained”; He wants you to experience His unconditional acceptance.

Prayer has the power to restore the soul. But don’t feel bad if you need more than one prayer session. Sometimes negative emotions must be peeled away in layers, and the healing process may take time.

5. Tell your story when you are ready. Psalm 107:2a says, “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.” Why is it important for us to tell others about a shameful experience? Because they will never know that God can deliver them from the same horrible memory if someone is not willing to testify.

The devil doesn’t want you to share anything about your story. He will plague you with fears, such as, “Now they know who you really are,” or “They will never respect you again.” Don’t listen to the enemy. When you tell of God’s goodness, and how He set you free, your testimony will provide the keys to

unlock others who have been chained for years. {eoa}

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In Today's Cancel Culture, Show Some Love

Anger has reached the boiling point in our country—and today it's obvious even on airplanes. Flight attendants now require special training in how to deal with unruly passengers. A recent article in *Forbes* magazine noted that 2,500 violent incidents occurred on commercial planes from January through May 2021—including one skirmish in which a Southwest Airlines flight attendant lost two teeth.

Meanwhile, violence is even worse on the ground. The murder rate in the United States rose 25% in 2020, during the height of the pandemic, and those alarming trends continue in 2021 in cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia.

Why are people so on edge? Some experts blame “pandemic fatigue,” while others note that we live in a politically polarized society where people view looting, arson or gun violence as acceptable means of expressing their anger.

It has also become fashionable to lace conversations and

social media posts with profanity. Whether it's talk radio, political television shows, Twitter, Instagram, online comment sections or street protests, we've developed the skill of dropping verbal bombs on each other.

We don't care how our words hurt people anymore. We've become vicious. Our love has turned to ice.

We are naïve if we don't recognize that this cold-hearted hatefulness is affecting Christians. I've noticed that believers today get offended more easily when something goes wrong at church. No wonder we have a huge percentage of Christians who are post-COVID church dropouts.

The world tells us that ending a relationship is as easy as hitting the unfriend button or canceling a celebrity because of something he or she tweeted two decades ago. But when I read the Bible, I don't see any room for outrage, resentment, intolerance or "cancel culture." Jesus calls us to love—and He gives us the supernatural power to do it.

Have you considered ending a relationship recently? Did you already walk out of a church, or break a close friendship, during the last two years? I know many people who have.

If so, examine your heart and ask these probing questions first:

– **Am I giving up too soon?** The apostle Paul told the Ephesians that they should "always demonstrate gentleness and generous love toward one another, especially toward those who try your patience" (Eph. 4:2b, TPT). Your love will never grow unless it is stretched—and the best way to stretch your love is to show kindness when you feel like slamming a door in someone's face.

We often give up on relationships because we don't want to exert the energy to improve them. Relationships require a lot of work. When you unfriend someone just because they hurt you,

you are missing an opportunity to become more like Christ. Show some patience. Choose to love even when you don't get anything in return.

Ephesians 4:3 (NLT) says we must "make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace." The Greek word for "make every effort" means "to be diligent; to use speed; to be prompt or earnest; to labor." That means you shouldn't let wounds fester. Act quickly to repair the relationship before it gets worse!

– Would Jesus end this relationship? When you end a friendship because of an offense, you are doing the exact opposite of what Jesus did for you. Ephesians 4:32 (NASB 1995) says: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." You will never understand God's merciful love if you don't show it to others.

Jesus loved us even when we were sinners, and He patiently drew us to Himself using "ropes of kindness and love" (b, NLT). Before you end a friendship, judge a pastor, storm out of a church or "cancel" someone, remember how aggressively Jesus pursued a relationship with you. Let His ropes of kindness pull you out of your bad attitude.

When Peter asked Jesus how many times we are required to forgive a person, Jesus answered "seventy times seven" (see Matt. 18:22). Taken literally, that means 490 times—but Jesus wasn't proposing a mathematical solution. He was using the number seven to imply infinity. Stop counting how many times you have been offended and instead thank God for all the times He has overlooked your mistakes.

– Am I nursing a grudge? Today's culture of outrage tells us that anger is fashionable. Ranting is an actual genre of social expression. Our divisive political climate encourages people to get up mad in the morning, fuel their anger with hot political rhetoric throughout the day and then to go to bed

after listening to more arguments on news broadcasts. We are literally poisoning ourselves.

Many Christians are mad that a pastor slighted them. They are jealous of someone who took a ministry position they wanted. They are angry because a Christian did something hypocritical—yet they refuse to admit that their bitterness is the ultimate hypocrisy!

Resentment is deadly. It actually can make you sick. Unforgiveness puts a frown on your face, wrinkles around your eyes and a sour tone in your voice. On the flip side, showing affection is healthy for you. Doctors have proven that a 20-second hug strengthens your immune system!

Don't let today's cancel culture infect you. Go against the flow of toxic hate. Make a decision today to work harder at relationships. Show some love. Forgive those who hurt you. Be diligent to preserve the unity of the Holy Spirit. {eoa}

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✘ *For more information on how you can fight back against cancel culture, make sure to get a copy of what Charisma founder and CEO Stephen Strang says is his most important book yet. **God and Cancel Culture** releases Sept. 7, the day after Labor Day, wherever fine books are sold. Pre-order it at or on Amazon.*

The Lord Says: 'Let Down Your Nets for a Catch'

I rarely use this column to share a word of prophecy. But for the past few weeks, a message from the Holy Spirit has been rising in my heart. I sense that leaders all across the nation feel a similar stirring.

Everywhere I go these days, I encounter weary Christians and stressed-out church leaders who have been slogging through the challenges of this pandemic season. Some feel disoriented after months of online church meetings. Others have seen church members drift away during the quarantine, never to return. Still others feel they are on the verge of a breaking point because of spiritual warfare, tension in relationships, government lockdowns or overwhelming discouragement.

It reminds me of how the disciple Peter must have felt after fishing all night and catching nothing. Peter had failed the Lord. He had denied Jesus three times. He assumed he was disqualified. He went back to his old fishing career, but he couldn't even do that successfully. There were no fish in his nets.

But then the resurrected Jesus called from the shore. He said confidently: "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you will find the fish" (John 21:6, NASB).

Peter recognized the familiar voice of His Savior. He still felt ashamed for denying Jesus, yet Jesus gave him another chance. Peter hesitantly threw the net back into the sea, and the fish began to swarm in the water. The net wasn't strong enough to contain the catch.

This miracle was Jesus' way of showing Peter that he was still in the game—and that God would use him to bring about a spiritual breakthrough. It would only be a few more weeks before the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 people made the decision to follow Jesus after Peter's first attempt at mass evangelism.

Many of us feel like Peter after he had fished all night. We are tired. We wonder if our labor is making a difference. We see aging congregations, ineffective methods of ministry and an increasingly secular culture that is hostile to our faith.

But I hear the voice of the Lord calling from the shore. He still invites us to put our nets into the water—not in the same old way we did before, but on “the right side.” He invites us to try new methods, shift our paradigms and toss old traditions. He promises a surprise after a long season of fruitlessness.

Many churches I have visited in the past several months are beginning to see an unexpected harvest of souls. Many pastors have told me that new people who never attended church in the past are showing up at their services as congregations are meeting in person again.

My friend Josh Lindquist is a 37-year-old evangelist who leads Global Harvest Revival in Minneapolis. Before the pandemic he spent most of his time preaching overseas because he felt people were more open to receive the gospel in foreign countries. But today he is witnessing a new spiritual openness in the United States.

“I believe that the on-fire, remnant church is realizing that the only hope for America is a spiritual awakening,” Josh told me yesterday after leading an outreach in downtown Chicago. “America has been very hardened to the gospel, but now because of all the shakings in our society—the coronavirus, political turmoil and economic issues—I am seeing such openness.”

Lindquist has been working with two national ministries—evangelist Sean Feucht and Awaken the Dawn—to conduct bold evangelism campaigns in major cities. Awaken the Dawn’s goal is to set up 100 tents all across the United States to mobilize community-wide outreaches. At many of these events, Lindquist has seen dramatic displays of repentance.

“I’ve seen people bringing their drugs, meth and vapes to the altars,” he says. “Usually I see this type of response overseas, but I’m seeing such a desperation here, especially among young people. There is a huge hunger. I believe America is awakening.”

We can’t miss this moment. We can’t sleep during the harvest season. The Lord is saying to us:

“I have not given up on this nation. I will draw the broken, the hopeless and the hungry, and I will pour out my mercy on them. Prepare your nets and use them. Open your hearts wide and preach with compassion. My Spirit will empower you to reach the lost. Don’t rely on old religious methods. I will give you creative strategies, new ideas, new partnerships and a message that is soaked in My love and forgiveness, not condemnation or judgment. Expect even the rebels, the prodigals, the addicts and the skeptics to surrender to Me. Cry out for the rain of My Spirit. Expect to be shocked by the level of response. Then preach with boldness, and I will give you a catch that you cannot contain.” {*eoā*}

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If You Don't Love People, You Don't Love God

A lot of people ignore the last chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans because it's basically a long list of ancient names we can't pronounce. After Paul finishes his masterful teaching on grace and salvation, he sends warm greetings to his many friends in Romans 16.

Paul was apparently reluctant to leave anyone out of this list. He mentions Phoebe, Aquilla, Epaenetus, Mary, Adronicas, Junia, Ampliatus, Urbanus and "Prisca," an endearing nickname for Priscilla. He greets Stachys, Apelles, Herodion, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis and those in the household of Aristobulus. He says hello to Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologus, Julia, Nereus and Olympas.

Paul refers to many of these people affectionately as "my beloved," "my kinsman" or "a choice man." They were not casual acquaintances. They were Paul's close friends, and he carried them in his heart. He had been in prison with some of them. He missed them so much that he wept when he thought of them.

And after mentioning these 26 people—plus Rufus' unnamed mother and Nereus' unnamed sister—Paul sends greetings from his co-workers, Timothy, Lucius, Jason and Sosipater. And he reminds everyone to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (16:16). Paul's love for people was not just affectionate in a verbal sense. It was downright slobbery.

Paul began the book of Romans by telling his friends: "I long to see you..." (1:11a). Toward the end of the letter he says he looks forward to visiting them so that he can "find refreshing rest in your company" (15:32, NASB 1995). This miracle-working apostle and theological genius reveals another side of

himself; he's gushy, mushy and huggable. He's the quintessential people person.

It makes me sad to think Romans 16 is ignored today because the fervent love Paul showed his Roman friends is the essence of biblical Christianity. God wants us to love each other with pure, over-the-top passion.

Paul's love for people was not just evident in his letter to the Romans. He told the Philippians: "I long for you with all the affection of Christ Jesus" (1:8). He wrote to the Thessalonians: "Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you ... our own lives" (1 Thess. 2:8). He told Timothy: "I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day, longing to see you, even as I recall your tears" (2 Tim. 1:3-4).

This is what the Bible calls "the love of the brethren" (see Heb. 13:1). Our love for each other is supposed to be sincere, not faked. It is supposed to be fervent, not cool or professional. It is supposed to be affectionate, not distant or clinical. It is supposed to be dripping with emotion, not dry and intellectual. Our passionate love for each other flows out of our love for Jesus.

But there's a problem. Everywhere I go today I hear Christians bashing the church and complaining that they can't attend this or that local fellowship because of loveless, hypocritical believers. We've become experts at nitpicking; we are quick to find fault; then we are even quicker to judge and condemn. And we have figured out how to make these judgmental pronouncements sound super-spiritual.

Church dropouts today have a long list of reasons why they can't worship with other Christians: 1) "We don't agree with all their doctrines;" 2) "The pastor preaches too long;" 3) "The worship is too long;" 4) "The worship is too short;" 5) "The church closed during the pandemic;" 6) "The church never

closed during the pandemic;" 7) "A church member posted something online that offended me;" 8) "A church member complained about something I posted online;" 9) "The pastor didn't speak to me last Sunday;" or 10) "No one spoke to me when I visited."

There are actually 1,001 ways a Christian can and will offend you at church. But your job is not to count the offenses; it is to forgive every time. That is what fervent love requires. Yet we have become experts at being offended, and our bitterness squelches the holy love God wants us to demonstrate.

The apostle John wrote: "The one who says that he is in the Light and yet hates his brother or sister is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother and sister remains in the Light, and there is nothing in him to cause stumbling" (1 John 2:9-10).

If we want to be spiritually mature, this is the bottom line: We must love people no matter how they hurt us. Canceling the church is not an option. If your love has grown cold, ask God to remove the offense—and invite His people back into your heart again. {eoa}

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An Ambitious Plan to Pray From the Heart of America

After a global pandemic that has lasted 15 months, Christians will travel to the exact center of the nation in mid-July from eight directions to pray for the nation in the middle of a cornfield. The “Prayer at the Heart of America” event will be held in the tiny town of Lebanon, Kansas—population 218—after caravans of intercessors arrive from eight points on the compass.

“We believe this gathering in the heart of our nation is a vital part of a fresh awakening that God so desires to bring to America,” says Garry Bryant, a leader in the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, one of several denominations and parachurch ministries helping to organize the unusual event.

Intercessors will arrive in the Kansas town on July 23 from Augusta, Maine; Virginia Beach, Virginia; Miami, Florida; Donna, Texas; San Diego and San Francisco, California; Seattle, Washington; and Grand Forks, North Dakota. Another group of intercessors on motorcycles will ride the circumference of the nation, starting from Tacoma, Washington, and then head to Lebanon.

The tiny Kansas town is the geographic center of the continental United States. Hundreds of Christians will arrive there after praying in cities and small towns along their routes. All the prayer warriors will then converge in Lebanon for a six-hour prayer meeting.

The gathering was first envisioned by Doug Small, an author and prayer leader affiliated with the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). Author of *Prayer: Heartbeat of the Church* and *Transforming Your Church into a House of Prayer*, Small said he has dreamed of seeing caravans of Christians

rededicating the nation back to God.

Says Small: "Right in the middle of the nation, in the middle of a cornfield, is a monument that marks the geographic center of the continental USA. I've dreamed of people gathering there, carrying a torch like a marathon." Small says participants will avoid major interstates and instead "go through every little town and hamlet" as they travel to the center of the nation, stopping along the way to pray in various venues.

Christians from about 70 denominations have been enlisted in the effort, along with representatives from the National Prayer Committee, Transform USA, Pilgrim's Covenant, the Children's International Prayer Commission and other prayer movements, Small said.

The event will be broadcast live on social media, but various denominations and church networks are encouraging Christians to attend in person. Participants will stay in hotels or RV parks in a 120-mile radius of Lebanon, in cities including Salina, Hays and Beloit. Information about the meeting location and lodging can be found at .

So why would hundreds of Christians want to go to such an expense to travel so far to pray in such a remote location?

"Without question, our nation has turned its back on its Judeo-Christian heritage and foundation," says the IPHC's Bryant. "The truth of God's Word is being ignored and rejected. Our sin has increased, and the moral fiber of our nation has been defiled. Prayer at the Heart is a call to the family of faith, and the invitation is extended to everyone who believes that God is able to heal our land and that He is our hope for revival and restoration."

"If we want revival in America, we have to press in for it," says Denise Gedda, a prayer leader based near Kansas City who will host intercessors coming from the Virginia prayer route.

“It’s time we showed God we are serious. We have to be desperate. I think at this point there is power when people lay down the things that occupy their time. We are saying, ‘Lord, we need You.’ We are taking a journey, praying in one accord and crying out to God.”

Terry Kesling, pastor of Christian Life Worship Center in Athens, Georgia, says he and his wife will join a caravan of intercessors who will drive from Virginia Beach, Virginia, to Kansas. During the six-day drive they will stop to pray in the nation’s capital as well as other significant spots including Williamsburg, Virginia.

Participants believe God will hear the cries of those who are desperate for spiritual awakening. Says Kesling: “I have sensed that this coming revival will consist of small fires starting in many places. It will not be just one big revival in one place.”

The event will run from 2 to 8 p.m. CST on July 23, but those driving in caravans will leave several days earlier to pray along their routes. You can go to [for information on how to join a prayer caravan.](#) {eoa}

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An Unexpected Move of the Spirit—in New Jersey

New Jersey is probably the last place I would associate with spiritual revival. It's the most densely populated state in the U.S., with clogged highways, crowded beaches and many older churches that are closing. But last Friday night I saw evidence of vibrant Christian faith in the middle of New Jersey's urban core.

About 85 young adults—most of them Ukrainian-Americans—jammed into a small chapel in the town of South River, a few miles from Newark. They worshipped for an hour, and as they sang, a few more people slipped into the back of the room. Some of them were from Portuguese, Hungarian, Indian, Asian and African-American backgrounds.

The leader of this group, Igor Marach, is only 24, but he's been involved in youth ministry since he was 18. Like so many Slavic Christians in this country, he embraced faith in Christ at an early age. Now, he's seeing an unusual spiritual momentum stirring among his peers—and it is spreading outside of his Slavic box to other ethnic groups.

“God is really doing something special with Slavic people in my generation,” says Igor. “Everyone is looking for truth. They are looking for something to believe in. And in this great search they are finding Jesus!”

Grace Church's young adult service takes place on Friday nights, when many 20-somethings would typically be in nightclubs or bars—especially now that pandemic restrictions have been relaxed. But these kids were worshipping Jesus with abandon. And after a sermon about total surrender, eight people made decisions to follow Jesus the night I visited.

After the first ministry time, another group gathered at the

altar asking for prayer to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Greg Szabo, a 22-year-old immigrant from Hungary, came to the front of the church that night and was touched by God as his friends laid hands on him.

“I was filled with the Holy Spirit that night and began to speak in tongues,” says Szabo, who came to the United States when he was 11 years old. He gave his life to Jesus in August during the pandemic. When he got home Friday night, he says he prayed in the Spirit for 45 minutes nonstop, “and a supernatural peace came over me, and a sense of intimacy that I have started developing with God.”

The youth didn't leave the church after the service ended on Friday. They went to the basement to drink coffee and eat snacks until after midnight. On Sunday afternoon they all went to the Jersey shore to play volleyball and get more fellowship time.

Shady Hebish is a 24-year-old immigrant from Egypt who is now a part of the Grace Church family. He doesn't understand when people in the church speak in Ukrainian or Russian, but he believes the love of Jesus overcomes the barriers of language and culture.

“I joined this community because I saw the love of God in the people,” says Shady, who speaks Arabic and English. “They welcome everyone from every background. I know that when I bring new believers and friends to Grace Church they will feel the love of God.”

Dan Rachkelyuk is only 22, but he helps lead the Friday meetings at Grace Church. Like so many of his Ukrainian friends, his family moved to the United States after the Soviet Union dissolved. He now believes his new homeland is his mission field.

“The Holy Spirit is moving in our youth,” Dan says. “Some people come to our services, and they were not even invited.

They are repenting and coming to Jesus almost monthly. And we are seeing signs and wonders following the preaching of the gospel.”

What is happening at Grace Church is actually not unique. A large number of Slavic Christians came to the United States in the 1980s and '90s, looking for religious freedom. They settled in Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, Sacramento, New Jersey and many other urban areas. Today, the children and grandchildren of those immigrants are spreading revival fires beyond the confines of Slavic culture.

And at a time when many American congregations are losing members, Grace Church has run out of seats. On this past Sunday, worshipers had to gather in an overflow room in the basement of their building. The church has purchased property nearby to build a bigger sanctuary, and the pastor announced they will begin an English-language service in two weeks to reach those who don't speak Ukrainian.

These immigrants who fled from the former Soviet Union didn't realize God was sending them to the United States to be missionaries. Today's new generation of Slavic believers is taking that mandate seriously. {eoa}

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