

In These Dark Times, Here's Why We Have the Hope of Heaven on Earth

Back in January, I watched one of my favorite movies, *The Hiding Place*. I've probably seen it 50 times. Near the end of the film, Corrie ten Boom goes to the crude hospital in the Ravensbrück camp to see her sister, Betsie, through the ice-covered windowpane. Betsie can barely lift her head, but she waves and tries to smile. Corrie knows it might be the last time she would see her.

I choked up at that point in the film because the scene reminded me of the last time I saw my 92-year-old mother through the glass door at her nursing home. Even though her facility is 10 minutes from my house, I'm not allowed to visit her because of a COVID-19 outbreak there.

When we know a loved one is close to death, we naturally feel sad. But I was reminded that even though Corrie experienced unspeakable loss when Betsie died in that awful Nazi camp, the two sisters are now reunited. They both loved the Lord. They are together now—and there are no lice, filthy barracks or sadistic guards with whips.

The sad goodbye in that horrific hellhole in Germany was followed by a joyful reunion in the presence of Jesus in heaven, where all tears are wiped away.

Have you ever wondered if you will see your loved ones in heaven? Of course you will, if they are followers of Jesus. When we are raised to life in Christ, we will still have our identities. I will still be me. You will still be you. And if we have a friendship now, we will have a friendship in heaven. And we will make many new friends from all over the world—including the Christians who died long before us.

Whenever life gets tough, I remind myself that something so much better awaits me. I know I have more work to do on this side of heaven, and I am praying for fresh strength to fulfill my assignment. Jesus gives me supernatural joy to face any trial here on earth. But I am also filled with hope that a glorious future awaits all who love Jesus.

I read the book *Heaven* by Randy Alcorn at the beginning of 2021. It's my favorite book on the topic because it clearly shows how much the Bible says about our eternal life with God after this world has passed away.

Alcorn writes: "If you're a child of God, you do not just 'go around once' on Earth. You don't get just one earthly life. You get another—one far better and without end. You'll inhabit the New Earth! You'll live with the God you cherish and the people you love as an undying person on an undying Earth."

Most Christians are focused on the here and now—until we attend a funeral and get a quick reminder of how short life really is. We lack an eternal perspective.

In previous generations, Christians sang often about heaven. Today, our music avoids the topic. That's why I've added a classic gospel song to my playlist. Vestal Goodman's version of "The Holy Hills of Heaven" is old-fashioned, but it makes me cry every time I hear it. One compelling part of the song says: "I see loved ones over yonder/Tears are gone and hearts are free/And from the throne King Jesus beckons/ Oh the hills of home are calling me."

Colossians 3:1b (GNT) says, "set your hearts on the things that are in heaven, where Christ sits on his throne." We should sing about heaven more and preach about it constantly. It is the greatest hope we have.

Thinking about heaven is not escapism; it is the best kind of therapy. When I grow weary of this world—the corruption, racism, political divisions, viruses, cancer, tyranny,

hatefulness and injustice—I remind myself that Jesus will one day re-create this world to be the sinless paradise He always intended for us.

In heaven there will be no hospitals, nursing homes, masks, ventilators or social distancing. There will be no pandemics, murders, riots or funerals. I have read the last chapters of the Bible. Revelation 21:4b (NASB) says: “There will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain.”

If you are a believer in Jesus, you have the sure promise of a home on the other side. Think about that often, sing about it and tell everybody else about the source of your joy. {eoa}

J. Lee Grady was editor of Charisma for 11 years and now serves as contributing editor. He directs *The Mordecai Project* (), an international ministry that protects women and girls from gender-based violence. His latest book is *Set My Heart on Fire* (Charisma House).

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4 **Awesome Miracles That Happened When Jesus Died**

For centuries Christians have called the day that Jesus died on the cross “Good Friday,” because on that day, the Lamb of God was sacrificed to pay for our sins. It was unquestionably a good day for those who believe in Christ. It was the day our Savior laid His life down for us, enduring the cruelty of a Roman crucifixion and taking the burden of our sins on His body so we could escape eternal judgment.

But when we commemorate the events of Jesus’ death, we tend to fast-forward to Sunday because we love happy endings. We celebrate the resurrection, as we should, but sometimes our big gatherings, Easter brunches and egg hunts distract us from grasping the full impact of what happened on the cross.

This year, before I move on to Resurrection Sunday, I plan to hit the pause button, so I can spend more time pondering the events of that dark Friday.

We tend to romanticize the Easter story, painting it with pastel pinks, blues and yellows.

But the true story of Christ’s death and resurrection was not sweet or serene. It was dark and fearsome, a palette of dried blood, rusty nails and a black sky. It was marked by strange atmospheric patterns, eerie noises and geological upheaval.

When Jesus died, the earth experienced the most dramatic power outage in history. God shook the foundations of the planet to show us that His Son had purchased salvation and forever triumphed over death and darkness.

Good Friday is the perfect time to remember the strange miracles surrounding that moment. Four astonishing things happened when Jesus died:

The shroud of darkness. Luke says darkness fell “over the whole land” (Luke 23:44b, NASB1995). Some theologians have assumed that a solar eclipse occurred, but such events don’t last three hours. Bible scholar J. Hampton Keathley III noted that the Greek words used in the phrase “darkness fell” imply that this was a sudden event rather than a gradual one.

This darkness was not the kind of weather phenomenon caused by storm clouds, dust or volcanic ash. “It was just like someone had turned out the lights,” Keathley says. The church historian Tertullian recorded that secular writers mentioned a strange period of darkness that occurred on that day. How far-reaching was the darkness? It’s possible that the sun’s light was blocked all across the globe. Just as God brought a thick darkness on Egypt during the time of Moses, God judged sin and proved Satan to be the ultimate loser.

The rending of the temple’s veil. Matthew tells us “the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matt. 27:51a). At the moment Jesus announced, “It is finished,” from the cross, suddenly the thick curtain that separated men from God was ripped down the middle by an invisible power. Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote of that holy moment: “Now, at the death of Christ, all was laid open, the mysteries were unveiled. ... The rending of [the veil] signified that Christ by His death opened a new way to God.”

The earthquake. The timing of this event was not a coincidence. Right after Jesus died, “The earth shook and the rocks were split” (Matt. 27:51b). Henry points out that this was not just a local geological event—it was felt in adjacent countries. There were no seismic instruments back then. But we know from the biblical record that the epicenter of this quake was a bloody, hallowed plot of ground known as Golgotha.

The voice of Jesus literally split the rocks. “The earthquake,” Henry wrote, “signified the mighty shock, nay, the fatal blow now given to the devil’s kingdom. So vigorous was the assault Christ now made upon the infernal powers, that the earth trembled.”

The power of sin was broken. The greatest earthshaking miracle happened when Jesus spilled His blood at Calvary. He was our substitute. He died in our place. Isaiah said: “But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa. 53:6b). Jesus did not deserve to die. Yet in the most mind-boggling transaction in history, God transferred all the guilt and shame of the world’s sin to the innocent Passover Lamb.

Take time to marvel at what happened on that wondrous cross on Good Friday. Sin has been judged; Satan has been defeated; your sin has been paid for; and the way to God’s presence has been opened for you. {eoa}

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Words Hurt—But God Can Heal Your Damaged Soul

When I first met my friend “Guillermo,” he couldn’t make eye contact. I knew he had suffered a lot of abuse because he

always held his head down. When I asked him about it, he told me his angry father often called him names and scolded him continually.

I once prayed for a woman named "Paula" who felt unwanted because her parents told her she was a "mistake." Another young man I know, "Sean," was constantly teased by classmates because he struggled with his weight. Even though he found salvation in Christ as a young adult, he considered suicide more than once because he felt so bad about himself.

I meet people constantly who are bleeding inside because of verbal abuse. Some struggle with a physical or learning disability; others are insecure about their appearance; others were bullied, and the cruel words they heard on a playground were seared into their brains with a hot iron. In each case they were teased, taunted or branded failures.

I've heard some preachers say, "Oh, just get over it. Everybody deals with negative words." It's true that name-calling and verbal abuse is common. But it's not easy for people to overcome the trauma it causes. It's the reason many people are addicted to alcohol, drugs or prescription medicines. Soul pain is real.

What about you? Do you find it difficult to describe your positive qualities? Did your parents, siblings, teachers, classmates or even a spouse pin hurtful labels on you—such as "stupid," "fatso," "loser," "lazy," "queer," "sissy" or worse? Words, like knives, can leave permanent scars. Verbal abuse can trigger shame, inferiority and depression. If this is hindering your relationship with God and others, consider taking this journey toward healing:

1. **Realize you are not alone.** The Bible is full of stories of insecure people who ended up doing heroic things. Sarah was barren, yet God called her a mother of nations. Moses was a stutterer, yet God called him to

confront Pharaoh. Gideon thought he was the weakest in his family (see Judges 6:15), but he became a warrior. David was an embarrassment to his father—probably because he was born outside of marriage. If you feel inferior, you are in good company!

2. **Bury the lies you've believed.** False beliefs will not collapse without a fight. You must identify the lies you believe about yourself, and then renounce them. This is not something you can do alone; you must be willing to talk about your inferiority with a counselor, a pastor or trusted friends.

When I was in my 20s, I asked two friends to pray with me because I felt inferior. This deep insecurity made me shy and fearful, but I wanted to be confident so that I could grow spiritually and discover my calling. That prayer session put me on a path toward full-time ministry. I would have stayed in my prison of insecurity if those men had not helped me see that God had something important for me to do with my life.

3. **Confess your new identity.** Gideon felt like a failure when the angel of the Lord said: “The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior” (Judg. 6:12, NASB1995). At that point, Gideon was looking around and wondering, *Who is this guy talking to?* He did not believe he was a warrior! Yet God redefined Gideon’s identity and eventually changed his name to Jerubbaal, which means (my paraphrase) “The devil is in trouble.”

But it is not enough to simply believe in your heart. You must boldly proclaim who you are now. Joel 3:10 declares: “Let the weak say, ‘I am a mighty man.’” You must say it! If you were told you are a failure, say: “I am more than a conqueror.” If you were told that you are fat and ugly, say: “I am my beloved’s, and His desire is for me” (Song 7:10). This might be a difficult exercise, but make a list of your good qualities. God has blessed you in ways you don’t realize.

4. **Stop comparing yourself with others.** At the core of sinful human nature is the desire to have what isn't ours. That's why one of the commandments God gave Moses was "Do not covet" (see Ex. 20:17). We live in a culture that celebrates perfect beauty, athleticism, youth, celebrity and wealth—and our media constantly reminds us of what we don't have by bombarding us with images of "perfect" people.

Don't let those photoshopped idols control you! Social media doesn't set the standard for us—God does. Instead of focusing on what you aren't, celebrate who God made you to be. If I had spent my life lamenting the fact that I wasn't a talented athlete or a savvy businessman, I would have never discovered the unique talents God gave me.

5. **Be filled with the Holy Spirit.** You can never overcome worthlessness and inferiority in your own strength. It is the Holy Spirit who changes us. Just as He convicts us of sin and purifies our motives, He also strips away the lies we have believed about ourselves and heals us from the abusive words that crippled us. Ask Him to fill you so full that those lies can't hang around any longer.

If your soul has been abused by hateful words, say this prayer now:

"Lord, You are more powerful than any label that has ever been put on me. I renounce the lies I've believed about myself. I'm not weak; I'm strong in You. I'm not stupid; I have Your wisdom. I'm not worthless; You died on the cross to redeem me. Thank You that because I'm in Christ, I'm a new creation. I'm not bound by my old identity—I have a new identity in Jesus. Help me to see myself the way You see me—as Your beloved child and as a powerful, anointed, gifted disciple. Amen." {eoa}

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Get Ready for God's Surprises

Sometimes I wonder how the early disciples felt after Jesus left this earth. They were in awe after seeing the wounds in His hands and feet. They had never been more convinced that He was God in the flesh. Yet they probably battled fear and discouragement because He left them alone when He ascended into heaven.

Jesus told them He was sending the power of the Holy Spirit, but what would that look like? They had no idea what was next. Jesus didn't give them a script. There was no church bulletin to explain that a rushing wind would blow at 9 a.m., or that flames would rest on their heads at 9:05 a.m., or that they would speak in strange languages at 9:10 a.m.

Pentecost was a surprise. It was that way in the first century, and it is that way every time God sends revival. Like the "violent rushing wind" that blew in the upper room (Acts 2:2b, NASB), Pentecost is always an unscheduled interruption.

The moral and spiritual condition of people in the American colonies was deplorable in the 1720s. Churches were dead because most ministers weren't converted. Then some young people in New Jersey began to experience conversion, and this triggered the First Great Awakening. Hundreds of new churches

were formed over the next two decades as masses responded to calls to repentance issued by preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield.

The Second Great Awakening was also unexpected. People would sometimes travel 100 miles by horseback or in wagons to attend church services. During outdoor “camp meetings” in Kentucky and Tennessee, hundreds of people came under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and turned to Christ. Many people fainted or trembled because of God’s tangible presence. The noise of the people’s shouting was so loud that it was sometimes compared to “the roar of Niagara.”

The Azusa Street Revival of 1906 was also a surprise. No one in the racially divided United States expected God to use an African-American holiness preacher to lead a national movement—but it was in William J. Seymour’s meetings in Los Angeles that the Pentecostal revival began. The charismatic movement erupted in 1967 when a group of Catholic college students met for a retreat. After they began speaking in tongues, the fervor spread. It eventually touched more 300 million people.

As I pray for another spiritual revival in my lifetime, the Lord keeps bringing me back to Acts 2:43: “Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.” One characteristic of revival is that it baffles people. Even if we pray for it often—and we should—it always causes head-scratching, mind-blowing, jaw-dropping awe when it hits.

I don’t know all the amazing ways God will demonstrate His power in this next revival, yet I know it’s coming. I believe I will live to see the next wave. Here are seven surprises you can expect to see in the coming spiritual awakening. Please pray accordingly:

Expect an influx of unchurched people who are hungry for

spiritual transformation. Right now we see growing opposition to the message of Christ. But we are heading for a tipping point. People today are more stressed, worried, depressed, confused, addicted and emotionally broken than ever. In the midst of this darkness people will go where they see light. Prepare for a harvest.

Expect supernatural eruptions of God's presence. People will not want to leave a church service when the glory of God comes. Dead formalism will be replaced by the life of the Holy Spirit. Churches that normally end by noon may go on for hours when God's presence takes over.

Expect an outbreak of healings. In the 1950s healing revival, people flocked to certain celebrity evangelists to receive a touch from God. But in the coming revival, teenagers, truck drivers, immigrants and schoolteachers will pray for the sick and see miracles. Spontaneous healings will also become commonplace during corporate worship gatherings.

Expect nearly vacant church buildings to be filled with worshippers. Some small churches today are hanging by a thread and almost ready to close. But God can revive the weary and open the barren womb. In some cases He will send new leaders, and when they begin to preach the uncompromised Word of God, new life will bring dramatic transformation and growth.

Expect many prodigals to return to the Father. The Lord gave me this promise from Zechariah 10:8 about the younger generation in America: "I will whistle for them to gather them together, for I have redeemed them; and they will be as numerous as they were before." When the wayward return, there will not be enough room to contain them.

Expect noisy demonic disruptions, followed by miraculous deliverance. Like ancient Ephesus, our culture is demonized. Dark spiritual forces have held many people captive. There will be resistance when those who are bound hear the truth.

Prepare now, because most devils do not leave quietly.

Expect churches in small towns and remote rural areas to experience spiritual revival. The coming revival is not just for big churches in big cities. The Holy Spirit is attracted to places large and small—wherever there is hunger and humility. And people will drive long distances to visit churches in tiny towns where God is manifesting His power.

Our merciful God plans to visit us again with His refreshing latter rain. Pray for the outpouring. And prepare to be awestruck. {eoa}

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Beware of Spiritual Lone Rangers

In this pandemic era, many churches are airing their services online and encouraging members to meet in homes. And the “house church” movement is growing as more and more mature believers step out in faith to start non-traditional congregations. The church is breaking out of its traditional box. That’s a good thing.

What is not good, however, is that untested, untrained and unqualified people are also seizing this opportunity to start

ministries when they have no business doing so. I call these people Lone Rangers because they have no mentors. They are accountable to no one, yet they claim to be experts all on their own. They take orders from no one, yet they are happy to be in charge.

Suppose a church starts a network of home meetings and provides practical training for the leaders of those groups. Then imagine that one couple in the church decides to start their own group without attending the leadership training sessions because they feel they don't need to comply with the pastor's rules or standards. Their spiritual pride and independence infects others, and before you know it you have a split in the church.

These types of divisions have plagued the church since the first century, when biblical writers such as Jude warned about "wild waves" and "wandering stars" who spread dissension and false doctrines (Jude 1:13, NASB).

Lone Rangers are dangerous, even though they often don't realize they are being used by Satan to tear down God's work. Like the rebellious Korah in the Old Testament, they question godly authority and claim spiritual superiority. Here are six indicators of a Lone Ranger spirit. Heed the warning signals!

1. **Lone Rangers are super-spiritual.** Their feet rarely touch the earth. They may spend lots of time in prayer (or claim to), and they may even fast or impose severe discipline on themselves. But their relationships are dysfunctional. Remember: Jesus did not live His life like a guru, floating around while dispensing spooky wisdom. He lived in the real world and interacted in a practical way with people He loved. So should we.
2. **Lone Rangers often claim special revelation.** Paul warned the Colossians about prideful people who were always seeing visions from God. He said: "Let no one keep

defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen" (Col. 2:18a).

God speaks to us through His Holy Spirit, and He can use dreams, visions or prophetic words. Yet His message always flows with love and brings peace. On the contrary, a spirit of weirdness usually follows hyper-spiritual people who claim to receive constant revelations. Beware of a person who claims they always know what God is saying about everyone and everything.

3. **Lone Rangers can't submit to authority.** Renegade leaders believe they are more gifted than pastors or other spiritual leaders. Therefore they find it impossible to receive instruction or correction from anyone. They have no mentors because they feel they are spiritually superior. They also are prone to gossiping about a leader or spreading false accusations. Because of their pride, they separate themselves from the body of Christ.
4. **Lone Rangers crave attention.** Perhaps because they lacked affirmation and love when they were growing up, Lone Rangers are desperate to be the center of attention. Their emotional deficit pushes them to seek approval. Some people who seek to serve as intercessors or counselors, or even as members of the worship team, may actually need inner healing before they can be effective in these public roles. If you put these people on a stage before they are healed, you will regret it!
5. **Lone Rangers have a victim mentality.** Most of the Lone Rangers I know believe they are constantly being attacked by the devil—as if they are his biggest threat. The slightest problem in life—from a traffic ticket to a hangnail—becomes evidence of a demonic conspiracy against them. And if a pastor brings needed correction to them, it is perceived as a spiritual attack.

6. **Lone Rangers often end up in deception.** Renegades who reject correction or spiritual authority are headed toward disaster. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, started that cult after he declared that all Christian denominations were false churches. He cut himself off from the body of Christ and started the biggest heresy of the 19th century. People who become so focused on their spiritual superiority will end up denying Jesus and justifying their own sinful behavior.

Church should be a healthy place. We need to train leaders who are humble, teachable, submissive to authority, down-to-earth, servant-hearted and emotionally mature. Don't let Lone Rangers do their damage. {eoa}

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Why 'Cancel Culture' Can't Cancel the Bible

It seems no one these days is immune from being canceled. The names George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are being removed from school buildings. J.K. Rowling, creator of the Harry Potter series, has been canceled because she criticized the transgender movement. Even talk show host Ellen DeGeneres has been attacked online because of reports that she mistreats her

employees.

I'm not sure what was worse about 2020—the COVID-19 pandemic or the intolerance of “cancel culture” that erupted in the past 12 months.

Naturally, Christians are worried that rights to freedom of speech and religion will soon be taken away in this hostile environment. What if Twitter, Facebook and YouTube ban Christian content on their platforms? What if Google eliminates access to Christian websites? Could America become like China, where government agents arrest pastors for openly preaching the gospel?

I'm not a doom and gloom guy. I believe the majority of politicians in this country still believe in liberty. Besides, there aren't enough prison cells in this country to hold all the sincere Christians who are willing to go to jail for their faith. But even if there was a movement to stamp out Christianity in the United States, it wouldn't work.

Why do I say that with confidence? I have read history. In spite of all the violent efforts to squelch religious faith over the centuries, the gospel has continued to spread. Consider the authors of the New Testament, who first introduced the truth about Jesus:

– Matthew was killed with a spear while preaching in Ethiopia, around 60 A.D.

– Mark was killed by a mob in Alexandria, Egypt. Tradition says they tied a rope around his neck and dragged him through the streets until his body was unrecognizable.

– Luke, the beloved Gentile who traveled with the apostle Paul, was supposedly hanged from an olive tree in central Greece.

– John was banished to the Isle of Patmos, off the coast of

Turkey. He was “canceled,” yet he was able to write while imprisoned.

– Paul was probably beheaded in 67 A.D. by Nero.

– Peter was supposedly killed in Rome under the rule of Nero. Tradition says he was crucified upside down.

– James, the brother of Jesus and author of the epistle of James, suffered martyrdom at the hands of his Jewish enemies. The historian Josephus says James was stoned, while another early Christian historian, Hegesippus, says he was thrown from a tower.

– Jude, another brother of Jesus who wrote the short epistle of Jude, suffered a martyr’s death. Some say he was crucified; others say he was clubbed to death and then sawn in half.

All the authors of the New Testament were “canceled.” Yet that imperishable seed that fell to the ground and died sprang to life again. Consider also the Old Testament prophets. Jewish tradition says Isaiah was sawn in half, while Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt. Ezekiel, Micah and Amos were also martyred.

Besides these authors of the Bible, consider those brave saints who translated and distributed the Bible in the early days.

John Wycliffe was branded a heretic by the Catholic Church because he wanted to make the Bible accessible to everyone. He was a thorn in the side to the corrupt bishops and priests he criticized. Several years after his death in 1384, his writings were banned and his corpse was exhumed and burned. But he became the forerunner of the Protestant Reformation, and his ideas spread throughout Europe.

William Tyndale was arrested for heresy in 1536 because he translated the Bible into English. He was tied to a stake and

strangled to death, and then his body was burned. But the contraband Bible he published became the source of the King James Version of the Bible that later was distributed all over England.

Even in the 1980s, Bibles had to be smuggled into Soviet countries because communists had “canceled” Christianity. Today, owning your own Bible in Saudi Arabia can land you in prison. The same is true in North Korea, Yemen, Afghanistan and Iran. At least 50 countries in the world severely limit access to the Bible today.

In China, where many churches are still persecuted and Bibles sometimes confiscated, copies of the Scriptures are mass-produced by the Amity Printing Company there. In 2018, 80 million Bibles had been printed for Chinese churches, plus 100 million for overseas Christians. China actually produces one copy of the Bible every second!

In spite of all the confiscations, raids, book burnings, crackdowns and cancellations of Christianity, the Bible is the bestselling book of all time—with more than 5 billion copies published in more than 2,000 languages. No matter how evil men attempt to cancel the gospel, the apostle Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 2:9b (NLT) are still true: “But the word of God cannot be chained.” {eoa}

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Prophetic Words Are Never for Sale

Years ago I met a flamboyant preacher from New York. He was very popular, but something about him was really creepy. He claimed to be a prophet, and he was applauded for his uncanny ability to “read people’s mail.” But he strutted arrogantly on the stage, spoke harshly to his staff and spent a lot of time taking up offerings.

Then he launched a website and encouraged his followers to register for “monthly prophetic words.” You could purchase these personal messages once a month or pay \$365 for a full year of prophecies. Once I called his ministry’s office and recorded this man making his “sales” just so I would have proof that he charged people a fee to hear from God for them.

I wasn’t sure which was worse—that a conniving minister could be that corrupt or that naïve Christians could actually trust a swindler to give them divine guidance.

That was more than 20 years ago. I thought these kinds of charismatic shenanigans had ended, but I found out recently that the disturbing trend continues in the era of PayPal. One ministry now encourages people to fork out \$30 a month for a regular prophetic word.

I believe in the gift of prophecy. Friends as well as strangers have shared powerful prophetic messages with me that brought encouragement and confirmation of what God was already saying to me. I have also given many words of prophetic encouragement to others. But every good gift has its counterfeit—and the devil stays busy offering cheap substitutes for the Holy Spirit’s anointing.

Please don't fall for this trick! If you or someone you know has come under the spell of a charlatan, please take note of these simple principles:

God wants you to hear from Him directly. If you are a born-again Christian, you have the Holy Spirit living inside of you—and He wants close fellowship. People in the Old Testament had to visit a priest to obtain God's guidance as well as forgiveness of sins. Today, because of what Jesus did for us, we have direct access to God. We are all priests (see 1 Peter 2:9).

It is idolatry to put a man in the place of God and expect him to show you the future or trust him to guide your life. That doesn't mean the Lord will not sometimes use a person to teach, mentor, correct or give you a message from God. But we must never worship the human vessel God uses.

Instead of chasing a prophet for a word (or paying him or her for it), read your Bible and pray. Expect God to speak to you. If you need a prophecy, God knows where you live, and He can send His messengers to you. And the best part? It's free!

There's no biblical basis, ever, for charging for a prophecy. Before the prophet Samuel died, he reminded the people that he had never cheated or swindled anyone. The apostle Paul told the Ephesian elders the same thing in his farewell message. He said, "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing" (Acts 20:33).

Samuel and Paul reminded us that genuine Christian leaders are humble servants of God, and they never exploit for personal gain. When ministers in the New Testament preached, healed the sick or prophesied, they did it without expectation of reward. And when people give tithes or offerings to a church or a preacher, the money is never payment for a spiritual gift. It is blasphemous to suggest that God's guidance, healing or favor can be bought.

People who sell spiritual gifts have corrupt character. After Elisha prayed for Naaman's healing, Naaman tried to give Elisha an offering—but the prophet refused to take it. Then Elisha's servant, Gehazi, went to Naaman and lied to him—telling him that Elisha really wanted him to give him a gift. Gehazi came home with two big bags of silver and some fancy new clothes, but God judged him for his greed.

The moral of this story is simple: Never try to profit off of the Lord's miracle power! We still have Gehazis in the church who think they can turn the Holy Spirit's anointing into a get-rich-quick scheme. No matter what kind of payment plan they offer or how spiritual they sound, stay as far away as possible from charlatans and sorcerers.

J. Lee Grady was editor of Charisma for 11 years and now serves as contributing editor. He directs The Mordecai Project (), an international ministry that protects women and girls from gender-based violence. His latest book is *Set My Heart on Fire* (Charisma House).

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Are You Insecure About Public Speaking? Join the Club

God called me to preach 23 years ago, but it took months before I offered the appropriate response—which is, “Here I am, Lord, send me.” For years I felt like the reluctant Moses, who complained to God: “Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent” (Ex. 4:10, NASB). The Lord kept pushing me out of my comfort zone, urging me to surrender my fears so I would take the microphone willingly.

The reason I struggled to surrender is because I battle with insecurity about my delivery style. I’m not T.D. Jakes, Jentezen Franklin or Steven Furtick. If I compare myself with celebrity speakers, I feel like crawling off the stage.

On many occasions after speaking in a church or conference, I battled discouragement and wondered if my words had hit the mark. Did I preach OK? Did the message sink in? Finally I asked an older pastor if he had ever struggled with disappointment in his pulpit performance. He smiled and told me: “Son, I feel that way every Monday of my life.”

That’s when I realized that most people who are called to speak for God don’t feel confident about it. Most of us, if we are honest, feel weak and unqualified. Welcome to the club!

We should call ourselves The Fellowship of the Reluctant. Those who dare to allow God to speak through them will always squirm in holy agony. We will battle timidity, butterflies, self-doubt and discouragement. It is part of the labor of true ministry.

Today I mentor many young leaders who know God wants to use

them in public speaking. I've offered practical tips about sermon preparation and how to flow in the Holy Spirit's anointing. But what I want them to understand most is that speaking for God is both a glorious and a horrifying responsibility.

For years I have used to the story of Jericho's walls to share truths about preaching. Here are three things you must remember from the sixth chapter of Joshua:

No. 1. God uses weak, common vessels. When God planned to defeat the enemy at Jericho, he told Joshua to have his men blow trumpets. Those trumpets were crude rams' horns, not fancy brass instruments. God uses the weak things of this world to confound the strong.

The apostle Paul called the preaching of the gospel "foolishness" (see 1 Cor. 1:18). While it is OK to improve your speaking abilities, don't become so polished that you become an orator with nothing to say. You are just a ram's horn. Don't try to be sophisticated.

Rams' horns came from animals that had been sacrificed. Only consecrated preachers who have died to self can preach a message that will bring down a spiritual wall.

A lot of preaching today is slick and orchestrated. But sometimes, after the applause, we realize it was just a bunch of ear candy. What we need in today's pulpits is less scripted sparkle and more raw, honest, tear-stained pleas from broken men and women who are aflame with the Holy Spirit. It is only the Spirit's power that can flatten the devil's stronghold—not rehearsed one-liners, high-definition microphones, designer jeans, expensive sneakers or cool graphics on big screens.

No. 2. Effective preaching requires patience. The Israelites had to blast their trumpets for seven days to flatten the city. On most of those days nothing happened after the blast. Yet in the invisible realm, the walls of the city were slowly

cracking because of the invisible impact.

We love explosive sermons that get everyone waving handkerchiefs and dancing in the aisles. But the kingdom of God is not built on one-night stands. When Paul the apostle preached, the results were not always immediate—or positive. Sometimes there were riots and jail time.

What God is looking for is not one sensational sermon but a lifetime of faithful preaching. He wants consistency, not fireworks. Never evaluate a preacher by one sermon; look for a lifetime of faithful obedience.

It's great when we have the exciting, handkerchief-waving moments, but we must realize that God's Spirit is also moving on quiet days when no one shouts "Amen!" and all you hear in the audience is cell phones ringing and babies crying. Even in moments where it seems nothing happened, we know a harvest is coming because we planted the incorruptible seed of God's Word.

No. 3. We should never preach for recognition. The Bible doesn't tell us who blew the trumpets in Joshua 6. All of them were unnamed men. We know these guys played an important role, but their names never appear in lights.

They trudged through the dry desert around Jericho for seven monotonous days, blowing their horns until their throats were dry and their lips were sore. And in the end, when the walls of the city finally collapsed, Scripture says Joshua's fame increased—not theirs (see Josh. 6:27).

Today we need preachers who are willing to faithfully speak God's Word with no hope of fame or fortune. If you truly want all the credit to go to Jesus, you won't worry about your performance or your applause. Just do your job. Ask God for boldness, then preach the Word and the walls will eventually fall. {eoa}

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What Ravi Zacharias Might Tell Us Today

We were all devastated last May when Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias died of spinal cancer at age 74. Our souls were crushed again last week when we learned that the famous author and preacher had been involved in years of predatory behavior with women.

I didn't want to believe the reports. This man was an intellectual giant who could argue with the most die-hard atheists and agnostics. But a thorough investigation by Ravi Zacharias International Ministries proved that Zacharias sexually abused massage therapists for more than a decade—and that one woman even accused him of rape.

The fallout has been devastating. Women in Atlanta—as well as in Thailand, India and Malaysia—said Zacharias abused them or engaged in inappropriate behavior during massage therapy sessions. Some were even paid with ministry funds. And leaders of the ministry now admit they didn't do enough to hold Zacharias accountable for his double life.

The author's books have been pulled from shelves. His

publisher, HarperCollins, has announced that the 16 Zacharias titles they published, including *Who Made God?* and *The Logic of God*, will be taken out of print. The Atlanta-based ministry is downsizing, and its British subsidiary has split from the American organization. It's possible that RZIM, the largest apologetics organization in the world, may not survive.

Moral failures of this magnitude—especially when they involve high-profile ministers—are never easy for the Christian community. From the embarrassing televangelist scandals of the 1980s to the more recent downfalls of Bill Hybels, Jerry Falwell Jr. and Hillsong pastor Carl Lentz, Christians feel betrayed by these failures—and their victims often don't get the healing they need. (Sadly, in some cases we blame the victims.)

The world sees hypocrisy, and they ask: *Why can't your leaders just live like Christians?* It's an honest question. Meanwhile, Satan scores points when he successfully tempts preachers to compromise biblical standards. This is the worst kind of defeat for our team.

There's no easy way to process the awfulness of a religious scandal. We can pray for the victims. We can pray for the families of the fallen ministers. We can pray for restoration for the men or women who failed. But is there any way to avoid these tragedies?

I've gone through a gamut of emotions after hearing about Zacharias. I'm sad because so many women were exploited by a man of God they trusted. I'm shocked that the leaders of RZIM didn't act fast enough when some of them saw warning signs. I'm disappointed in Zacharias himself. He led so many people to faith in Christ, only to have his ministry irreparably tainted because of the secrets he tried to hide.

I can't help but imagine what Zacharias would tell us now, in hindsight, if he were here to explain it all.

I can't be certain, but I believe he would warn us that if we build our lives and ministries on hidden sin, the foundations will crack. Since Zacharias was a gifted Bible scholar, he might refer to 1 Corinthians 3:12-13 (NASB): "Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, each one's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each one's work."

Those are sobering words. It is God who ultimately reveals what's at the bottom of our service for Him. He knows our motives. He knows our hidden agendas. He knows if we built our ministries on integrity, humility and purity or lies, pride and corruption. Things might look good on the outside for a while; we might be able to fool people about who we really are. But we can't fake it with God. He knows the difference between gold and straw.

Zacharias was the author of 30 books, and they sold millions. His sharp intellect opened doors to world leaders. Former Vice President Mike Pence and football legend Tim Tebow spoke at his funeral. He was the picture of success. Yet apparently he traded it all in, like Esau, for a bowl of stew. How sad that he didn't go to a trusted friend, confess his sexual addictions, step away from ministry and find healing for his soul before his death.

We Americans love success, and we tend to worship celebrities. Yet I've noticed that success often destroys people. Unless we have the character to sustain our blessings, they can become a curse.

All of Zacharias' books contain important truths about the Christian faith. But perhaps this man's most important message came through his tragic downfall. I plan to use this somber moment to inspect my own foundations. I pray you will do the same. {eoa}

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Please Stop Calling Women 'Jezebels'

Just when you thought America couldn't be any more divided, two Southern Baptist pastors in Texas recently poured salt in our national wounds by publicly referring to Vice President Kamala Harris as "Jezebel." The comments, one made on Twitter and the other in a recorded sermon, made conservative Christians look hateful and stirred the already boiling pot of political outrage.

In a sermon preached on Jan. 3, Steve Swofford of First Baptist Church of Rockwall, Texas, chided President Joe Biden for a lack of cognitive ability. Then, referring to Harris, he said: "Jezebel Harris, isn't that her name?" Swofford's comments quickly hit the fan.

A few weeks later Pastor Tom Buck of First Baptist Church of Tyler, Texas, called Harris a "Jezebel" on Twitter. When he was questioned about it, he tweeted again: "For those torn up over my tweet, I stand by it 100%. My problem is her godless character. ... Pray for her, but don't praise her!"

Perhaps these two pastors didn't realize that everything we

write, broadcast or preach from a pulpit is being watched carefully. News spreads fast in the digital age, and within days a firestorm was ignited among Southern Baptists. Pastor Dwight McKissic, a prominent black leader in the SBC, denounced Buck's tweet, saying: "To refer to the Madam Vice President in any context as 'Jezebel' is simply unwarranted and disrespectful and extremely harmful to the image of Southern Baptists, when this label emanates from the heart and mouth of an SBC pastor."

Some people consider the term "Jezebel" a racist term, because it has been used in the African American community to refer to an evil black woman. But I know hundreds of white, Hispanic and Asian women who also have been called Jezebels simply because they were gifted to either lead or preach. For centuries religious traditionalists used the Jezebel label to denigrate strong women, especially if they held senior positions.

I don't agree with most of Kamala Harris' politics. In fact, I'm on opposite sides of the aisle from her on many moral issues. But whether I agree with her about national policy is irrelevant. She is a public official, and she deserves to be treated with respect. Period. Christians are called to honor and pray for those in authority.

Since I became a Christian, I have prayed for presidents Carter, Reagan, Bush 1, Clinton, Bush 2, Obama and Trump. I will pray for Biden and Harris as well.

As a Christian man, I wish I could apologize to Kamala Harris on behalf of all the rude Christians who missed their chance to show Christ's love in this situation. I'm embarrassed that Christian leaders have used their pulpits to throw daggers at politicians. It's offensive, mean-spirited, carnal and immature. Hateful rhetoric also slams the door on the possibility of civil conversations with the people we attack.

To go farther, I'll take this moment to apologize to all women everywhere who have been labeled "Jezebel" by another Christian. Please forgive us for our chauvinism and lack of godly character. Real men aren't intimidated by strong women; in fact, we celebrate them and empower them.

Once during a conference I attended in Colorado, a popular female Bible teacher was introduced as the morning speaker. I was eager to take notes on her message. Then I overheard two male leaders who were sitting in front of me. They turned to each other and prayed: "We bind the power of Jezebel in the name of Jesus." These men viewed this godly woman as a witch because they had no room in their theology for a female minister.

Pinning the Jezebel label on a woman of God is a blatant attempt at character assassination. After all, Jezebel was the personification of evil. We read in 1 Kings 18-19 that she wielded tyrannical power over Israel through her allegiance to the cult of Baal. Through her manipulation and demonic power she was responsible for killing many of Israel's prophets.

It's offensive to suggest that a woman who loves Christ bears any similarity to this pagan priestess. Women I know who are preachers, missionaries and senior leaders have had to endure all kinds of rejection and criticism; they don't need more bullying from Christians.

Harris is not a preacher, but she does claim to have religious faith. (She says she grew up Baptist; her husband, Doug Emhoff, is the first Jew to be married to an American president or vice president.) If you don't agree with Harris' politics, you have the right to disagree with her and vote against her. But as a Christian, you also have the responsibility to show her human dignity and God's love.

The apostle Peter wrote: "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution ... Honor all people, love the

brotherhood, fear God, honor the king” (1 Peter 2:13,17). Pray for Harris. Ask God to change her heart on the issues that are important to God.

But if you throw nasty comments at her, especially in a public forum, you are not only revealing your own immaturity—you are making the entire Christian community look hateful. Please stop it. {eoa}

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