

Get Ready for the Biggest Paradigm Shift Ever

Last weekend I preached at a thriving megachurch in Newnan, Georgia, near Atlanta. Although Crossroads Church has a Southern Baptist affiliation, the worship is more energetic than many charismatic churches I've visited. Crossroads packs huge crowds into its sanctuary on weekends, although most of the people are masked and socially distanced these days. The pandemic hasn't stopped this church from reaching their community.

The most unique thing about Crossroads is its commitment to small-group ministry. During any given week, people take part in more than two dozen healing ministries—offering everything from divorce recovery to grief counseling to freedom from addictions or sexual abuse. New believers gather in small groups, so they can grow in their faith.

The church's pastor, Ken Adams, loves to preach the Word from his pulpit, but he's an unusual leader because he believes Christians can't grow without small groups and close relationships. He knows he's not the star of the show. He knows Sunday morning church isn't enough. That's why he organized a Discipleship Summit last weekend to encourage his members to embrace the call to biblical discipleship.

During the summit, my mentor of 47 years, Barry St. Clair, asked me to join him on the stage. We sat on stools and told the story of how he invited me to be a part of a small youth discipleship group when I was only 15. I shared how Barry not only taught me the basics of the Christian life but also modeled what it means to make disciples. His humble example inspired me to spend most of my adult life mentoring younger people; now my disciples do the same.

When I was at Crossroads this weekend I could sense that what was happening there was not an isolated phenomenon; it is evidence of a sweeping tsunami that will reshape the church in this decade. All across this nation and the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to reevaluate our core priorities. It has shoved us into an uncomfortable realization that business as usual will never work again.

God is using this crisis to prune away dead branches, so we can bear more fruit. Are you ready for the shift? I've described below some of the ways the Holy Spirit is renewing our wineskins so we can contain what He is sending:

1. **We are shifting from quantity to quality.** In the days before COVID, pastors measured success by what we called "the ABC's of ministry"—attendance, buildings and cash. We assumed we were successful if we had big crowds in a nice building. But the apostle Paul said ministry made with wood, hay and stubble will burn up when tested by God's holiness (see 1 Cor. 3:12-13).

Just because a sanctuary is full of people doesn't mean we are making strong followers of Jesus. Don't evaluate your success by worldly standards.

2. **We are shifting from spectators to disciples.** Churches that already had strong small group ministry before the pandemic have thrived during this last year. But churches that put all their resources into big congregational events have been shut down or have lost huge percentages of their membership. Church growth expert Thom Rainer predicts that 20% or more of marginal churchgoers (who were not connected to any small group) will never return after COVID.

Jesus didn't call us to make churchgoers. He never intended His followers to just sit in pews year after year, listening to the same sermons. He told them, "Go therefore, and make

disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19). He certainly did not want His followers to remain spiritual infants; He invites us all to grow up and do the works that He did.

3. We are shifting from big events to small groups. There’s nothing wrong with big gatherings. I love to worship with a crowd. But when we made the church about the crowd, we created a Frankenstein’s monster that doesn’t resemble the original church in the book of Acts. People don’t effectively grow if their only input comes from a weekly or monthly 30-minute sermon. They need discipleship in a close-knit environment with supportive relationships.

We live in a world full of fear, loneliness and abuse. And that’s a big reason many people would never set foot in a big church full of strangers. Their social anxiety prevents them from walking into a concert-style arena to hear a sermon. But they would consider visiting your home for a meal or a small group study. Why are we making it so hard for people?

4. We are shifting from unapproachable celebrities to accessible servants. We have lived through the era of the rock star preacher, and this fad will fade. True ministers of the gospel don’t allow people to worship them. When we embrace the idea that all Christians can make disciples—not just the most eloquent or the highest paid—we will impact the multitudes like the early church did.

Ministers who lead like Jesus aren’t afraid to empower others, and they aren’t afraid of their followers being more successful than they are. In fact, they want their disciples to surpass them. The faster we shift away from the celebrity model, and embrace Christlike humility, the sooner we will reach the world with the gospel. {eoa}

Need a Word From God? Seek It the Right Way

I often meet people who tell me they need a word from God. I've seen Christians line up in front of prophets, hoping for a quick solution to their problems. I've also seen those same Christians stand in line a second time in front of the same prophets because they didn't like the word they received the first time! I call these people "prophecy chasers."

God wants to speak to His people, and I believe He has a fresh word for all of us at the right time. But there is a right way and a wrong way to seek God for prophetic direction. I'm concerned that we charismatics are guilty of abusing the gift of prophecy. Here are some guidelines that will help you:

Read God's Word regularly. Many Christians crave a "direct" word from God, yet they refuse to study the Bible. They may even consider reading Scripture religious or boring—yet they love the thrill of getting a prophetic word in a public meeting. Carnal Christians aren't willing to be disciplined students; they want prophetic words handed to them on a silver platter. You will never become a mature Christian if you don't learn to hear from God on your own through His Word. And if you don't read Scripture, you won't know the difference between a true prophecy and a fake one—because prophecy never contradicts the Bible.

Look to God for direction, not people. I seek God daily for direction. I don't chase prophets to tell me what to do or to show me my spiritual purpose. God can certainly use a prophet to speak to me—prophets are gifts to the church—but my focus is on God, not on the men or women He uses. If you ever start

looking to a human being as your source of divine guidance, you are heading toward idolatry.

People who have the gift of prophecy must be careful they don't allow people to put them on pedestals. We are not mediums who read people's fortunes, and prophets should never allow themselves to be put in such a position.

Stop looking for the sensational. The apostle Paul said true prophecy is about three things: encouragement, comfort and exhortation (see 1 Cor. 14:3). True prophecy strengthens us, confirms God's promises and propels us into our divine destiny.

We've all heard of charismatic prophets who provide phone numbers or addresses in their prophetic words to confirm a message from God. It's true that God has the power to reveal such personal information, but in some such cases, the "prophets" were actually con artists who preyed on the gullible. Beware of prophets who use theatrics to bring a word to you. In all my years of ministry, the most solid prophets were humble men and women who never drew attention to themselves.

Don't hurry when seeking prophetic guidance. I've talked with Christians who were desperate for a word from God, but they informed me they were on a deadline. Sometimes they even seemed to be threatening God—as in, "If I don't hear from God by tomorrow, I quit!"

God moves according to His calendar, not yours. Don't throw a tantrum; mature disciples must learn to wait for God's word. Waiting will require you to adjust your timetable to God's. Don't let impatience derail you.

Sometimes God deliberately pushes the mute button. If His voice is not clear right now, it may be because He is leading you into a quiet wilderness season. You must learn to trust Him even when He's quiet. Wait on the Lord, and let your roots

grow deep.

Make sure your heart is willing to obey. Many people are eager to hear a word from God, especially if it tells them they will have a worldwide ministry or become independently wealthy. But prophecy is never sent to boost your ego. A true word from God cuts deep to the core; it requires surrender and demands holiness.

Henry Blackaby once wrote: “Our difficulty is not that we don’t know God’s will. Our discomfort comes from the fact that we do know His will, but we do not want to do it.” It is pointless to ask for God’s prophetic word if we are not fully yielded. Before you seek a word from God, lift your hands with an attitude of unconditional surrender and be willing to obey what He says.

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It's OK to Be Honest When You're Down

Of all the Christian books I've read and re-read, Charles Spurgeon's 1875 classic *Lectures to My Students* is the most worn out. In fact, the cover fell off two years ago, and I just taped the book together and read it again. I love it not only because of Spurgeon's biblical revelation but also because of his honesty about his frequent battles with discouragement.

Spurgeon was a giant of the faith and a much stronger man than I am. Yet he was honest with his students about his weakness. He scaled the heights of glory and led thousands of people to Christ, but he also knew the depths of depression.

He warned his students: "Good men are promised tribulation in this world, and ministers may expect a larger share than others, that they may learn sympathy with the Lord's suffering people, and so may be fitting shepherds of an ailing flock."

When I was young, celebrity faith preachers never admitted to having bad days. They lived in an unobtainable realm of victorious faith, overflowing prosperity and instant answers to prayer. They were always "up," and always ready to heal a sick person or miraculously cancel debts.

They never talked about their failures. They even taught that it was wrong for a Christian to admit to feelings of fear, grief, despair, loneliness or discouragement. They told us to never make a "negative confession." So I kept my mouth shut and pretended. But because my negative emotions were real, I felt like a spiritual misfit.

Imagine my surprise a few years later when I discovered Spurgeon's book and read this quote: "Fits of depression come over the most of us. Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at

intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy.”

My eyes were opened to see Bible characters in a different light. They didn't walk around wearing plastic smiles and superhero capes, snapping their fingers to magically remove obstacles. No. They struggled. They felt the anguish of delay and disappointment. They wept as they endured intense spiritual battles. They wrestled with fear, temptation, anxiety and despair. And yet God responded to their prayers and obedience, in His time, and He worked miracles through them—in spite of their obvious human frailty.

When we stepped into this New Year, I was tempted to buy a T-shirt that said, “I SURVIVED 2020,” but I wasn't sure if I had. It was a tough year. I felt disappointed, overwhelmed, shell-shocked and discouraged. And the heaviness didn't lift in January 2021. At times, it feels like I'm trudging through mud at midnight.

If you are experiencing a similar test of faith, here are three simple words of advice, offered with love from a brother who has been in the same fight:

1. **Don't isolate.** When Elijah fled from Jezebel, he hid in a lonely cave. Traumatized by the intensity of spiritual warfare, he told God: “I alone am left” (1 Kings 19:14). But the Lord reminded Elijah that there were 7,000 other prophets who had not bowed their knees to Baal. When you feel discouraged, get out of your cave, cancel your pity party and spend time with other Christians so they can encourage you.
2. **Tune in to hear God's promises.** On David's worst day, after the enemy had burned the entire camp, David called for the priest and “inquired at the Lord.” God then spoke clearly and said: “Pursue them, for you will

surely overtake them and will surely recover all" (1 Sam. 30:8). When you are in the heat of battle, soak your mind with Scripture, pray for direction and expect to hear. One promise from God will turn your situation around.

You will not get stuck where you are. There is a way through, and you will eventually get to the other side of this trial. Charles Spurgeon wrote: "The wilderness is the way to Canaan. The low valley leads to the towering mountain. Defeat prepares for victory. The raven is sent forth before the dove. The darkest hour of the night precedes the day-dawn."

3. Push the "rejoice" button. We love to quote Nehemiah 8:10: "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." But let's remember what Nehemiah had experienced before he said those words to the people of Jerusalem. He had seen the charred ruins of his city. He had endured constant harassment from his enemies. He was weary from building with one hand and fighting with the other. Yet somehow he found the grace to rejoice when he faced impossible odds.

Rejoicing is not pretending that you don't have problems. When you praise God, you are refocusing. You aren't denying the reality of your circumstances, but you are acknowledging that God is bigger than every challenge. When you sing, shout, clap your hands or dance in your prayer closet—no matter how you feel—you gain new strength to press forward because you see that God is more powerful than what is weighing you down.

There is no such thing as Christianity without praise. Just as the Psalms are in the center of your Bible, praise must be at the core of your faith. Christians sing when they are down. William Murphy's song "Praise Is What I Do" says:

*I vow to praise You
Through the good and the bad*

*I'll praise You
Whether happy or sad
I'll praise You
In all that I go through
Because praise is what I do*

If you feel overwhelmed by the spirit of heaviness, you don't have to act like the oppression isn't real. Every hero in the Bible faced similar dark emotions—but eventually they overcame them through faith, patience and the power of praise. I'll see you on the other side of 2021, and we will rejoice together.
{eoa}

In These Dark Times, We Have the Hope of Heaven on Earth

Last week I watched one of my favorite movies, *The Hiding Place*. I've probably watched 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 knew this might be the last time she would see her.

I cried 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 afresh 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 this current world.

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 fallen 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 think very little about heaven. We stay

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/ Their tears are gone/ and their hearts are free/ and from the throne King Jesus beckons/ Oh the hills of gold are calling me."

Colossians 3:1b says, "set your hearts on the things that are in heaven, where Christ sits on his throne" (GNT). We should sing about heaven more and preach about it constantly. It is the greatest hope we have. One day this dark, sinful world will end, and a glorious new earth will become our eternal home.

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 has defeated death and will one day recreate 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. There will be no 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 it. {eoa}

Have You Set Your 'GPS' for 2021?

At the beginning of every New Year I always reassess my goals and pray for God's direction. I ask myself: *What do I want God to accomplish in my life this year?* Then I seek the Lord to hear what He is saying to me about the next 12 months.

I'll admit this has not been an easy exercise for me this year. 2020 was exhausting, and the first two weeks of 2021 have already been incredibly intense! But I'm not going to let fear, discouragement or spiritual warfare hinder me from walking in faith. God has a plan for you and me, and a pandemic can't stop it.

Every year I engage in an exercise I call "resetting my GPS." I encourage you to try it. Here's how it works:

1. **G stands for "Goals."** Setting a goal is the first step toward success. People with goals have a sense of purpose, and they aren't easily distracted. On the other hand, those with no ambitions wander aimlessly. If you aim at nothing, you will surely hit it.

I see the power of goal setting in the life of the apostle Paul. He was motivated by a passion to take the gospel to the Gentiles. In his lifetime he traveled to what is now Turkey, Syria, Greece, Crete, Malta and Italy. His goal drove him forward.

He also set a goal to preach in Spain (see Rom. 15:24, 28). We don't know if he reached Spain or not, but that goal certainly motivated him to wake up every morning. When he wrote these words—"I press toward the goal to the prize of the high

calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14)—he was in chains in a Roman prison. Paul didn't let obstacles deter him.

But remember there's a difference between a dream and a goal. Dreams can be elusive—always "somewhere out there"—if the person dreaming never takes a first step. Your most vital step is to write down your goal. The prophet said in Habakkuk 2:2: "Write the vision, and make it plain on tablets, that he who reads it may run." You can't run toward your vision unless it is clearly stated.

2. P stands for "Prophetic Word." For many years I've developed the habit of seeking the Lord for a word for the coming year. Sometimes God gives me a verse from the Bible. Other times I get a phrase or simply one word. As I was praying for 2021, for example, the Lord said, "This will be a year of reaping." He also spoke to me from Habakkuk 3:17-18 that I must rejoice even when I don't see fruit.

You don't have to be a prophet to receive a personalized directive like this. God knows you. He also knows the challenges you face and the storms that may come. Jeremiah 29:11 says: "For I know the plans that I have for you, says the Lord, plans for peace and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." If you seek the Lord, He will speak a word to your heart.

Once you receive that prophetic word, hold onto it no matter what happens. God gave Abraham and Sarah a promise about an heir, but it took 25 years before Isaac was born. God does not work according to your timetable; you must submit to His schedule. A prophetic word will fill your heart with the hope and encouragement you need to move forward, in spite of delays, setbacks, personal failures, relationship breakups, illness, political turmoil or the loss of a loved one.

3. S stands for "Special Prayer." The most important part

of resetting my spiritual GPS is setting aside time to pray. I call it “special” prayer because it’s beyond the norm of my daily routine. I feel most prepared for a New Year if I can unplug and devote a block of time to commit my plans to the Lord.

Setting goals is a great step toward success, but goals are nothing if God did not inspire them. Proverbs 16:9 says: “A man’s heart devises his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” When we take our goals to God in prayer, we allow Him to override them if they are misguided; we also give Him permission to expand our goals if they are limited. We bow before God’s throne and tell Him that we only want His plans, not ours.

Proverbs 16:3 says: “Commit your works to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established.” You can facilitate special prayer in several ways. You may want to fast for a few days; you might go away for a weekend prayer retreat; or you could stay up a few nights and have a prayer vigil. My home church in Georgia is encouraging people to fast and pray the first few weeks of 2021.

You don’t have to adopt the same prayer routine every year. The important thing is to take your plans to God and ask for His GPS coordinates. Seek God’s wisdom and strategy. Knock on heaven’s door for His miracles. Ask for big things.

Expect God to speak to you. He will reveal His plans, rekindle your dreams, calm your fears and stir your faith so that 2021 will be a victorious year. {eoa}

Prophetic Words Are Not 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 last week 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, comfort 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:

1. **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 Pet. 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!

2. **There's no biblical basis, ever, for charging for a prophecy.** In the prophet Samuel's farewell address to Israel, he reminded the people that he had never cheated or swindled anyone. They replied back to him: "You have not defrauded us, nor oppressed us. Neither have you taken anything from any man's hand" (1 Sam. 12:4). The apostle Paul told the Ephesian elders the same thing in his farewell message. He said: "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothes" (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.

3. 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 from the Lord's miracle power!

When a sorcerer named Simon offered to buy God's supernatural anointing, Peter rebuked him severely by saying: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could purchase the gift of God with money!" (Acts 8:20). That was 2,000 years ago, yet we still have Simons and Gehazis in the church who think they can turn the Holy Spirit's anointing into a get-rich-quick scheme.

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Christmas Isn't Over Until

the Wise Men Arrive

When I was a child, Christmas always seemed like a huge letdown. There was a buildup to the holiday in December, with parties, family visits and the expectation of gifts. But then it all came to a screeching halt on Dec. 26. Our family's decorations went into the attic, Christmas merchandise disappeared from store shelves (replaced overnight by Valentine's Day candy) and radio stations abruptly stopped playing Christmas music.

I hated the disappointment. Seeing something so wonderful vanish so suddenly made me sad.

Thankfully, I've since learned that Christians throughout the centuries actually started celebrating Christmas on Dec. 25, and did so for 12 days—hence the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” They ended their festivities with the day of Epiphany—a special time to remember the wise men, or magi, who visited the baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

The wonder of Christmas can't be jammed into just a few days, so why are we always in such a hurry to end it? My decorations stay up longer now, so I can squeeze every bit of Christmas joy out of the season. And that's why I'm grateful for the visit of the magi. They showed up late for the party, but they had an important role to play in the coming of the Savior. Don't leave them out of the story!

The magi are only described in Matthew's Gospel. Drawn by the star that appeared over Bethlehem, they arrived from afar to see the infant Jesus, and they brought the strangest baby gifts ever: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Who were these men, and why did they give Jesus these expensive presents after they “fell to the ground and worshiped Him” (Matt. 2:11b, NASB 1995).

The magi were most likely priests or astronomers from what is

now Iran, or possibly Saudi Arabia. (We always assume there were three of them, but the Bible doesn't say that—only that they carried three gifts.) They were not Jews, yet they felt drawn to Bethlehem because they sensed something earthshaking was happening there, based on their research. From their own calculations they knew a baby had been born who was “King of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2). And they knew His reign and influence meant something profound for them, too.

There are three things we should ponder as we remember the visit of the magi:

1. **Their mission was prophetic.** The wise men were sent to be witnesses of Christ's true identity. They believed the prophecy of Micah, who predicted that the Messiah, the “Ruler” of Israel (Matt. 2:6), would be born in Bethlehem. When they knelt and worshipped the baby, they were inviting us to do the same.
2. **Their gifts were prophetic.** Gold symbolizes royalty, reminding us that Jesus is truly the King of kings. Frankincense was used by temple priests, and it shows us that Jesus, our High Priest, carries our prayers to God as our mediator. Myrrh is a fragrant perfume used to embalm dead bodies; it showed us that this King would die for us. Even when the baby was lying in a manger, His cruel death on a cross was foretold.

The gifts fulfilled a prophecy in Psalm 72: “Let the nomads of the desert bow before him, and his enemies lick the dust. ... the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. And let all kings bow down before him, all nations serve him” (Matt. 2:9-11).

3. **Their ethnic background was prophetic.** The magi were foreigners, yet they were paying closer attention to the Jewish Scriptures than the Jews themselves. They came from a far country to worship the Messiah, paving the way for a Gentile church. The magi came to show us that

Christ came for the whole world, not just for an elite few. They pointed at Jesus and signaled to people from every continent: “This is your King, too.” (It is truly fascinating that hundreds of thousands of Iranians are embracing faith in Christ today!)

What should be our response? We too should fall to the ground. He is our King, High Priest and Savior. He is not only King of the Jews, but also King of the whole earth. He deserves our wholehearted worship. {eoa}

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7 Reasons to Rejoice at the End of 2020

My friend, Barbara, who lives in northeast Georgia, had a vivid dream back in August. In the dream she was decorating her home for Christmas. She knew it was December. She was stringing lights and placing pine boughs and candles on shelves. She was also setting several tables with plates and silverware, in expectation of a big gathering.

At the close of the dream she took a big cake out of a box and set it on a table. The cake had big letters on it, in icing, that said, “REJOICE.” The dream ended when she put the cake on the table. When she woke up she knew the Lord was telling her clearly: “You will rejoice in December.”

Rejoice? What is there to rejoice about in 2020? This has been an awful year. We've experienced a pandemic. Many people have died or lost loved ones. Others have lost jobs. Businesses have closed. Churches have been on lockdown, or, if they're open, half the people aren't attending. There has been unimaginable racial tension and political division.

I don't associate a delicious cake with 2020. This year was not what I could call "sweet." If 2020 were a food, it would be more like fried liver and onions.

2020 has been so bad that some people decided to cancel Christmas. Since they can't travel, dine inside restaurants or visit loved ones, they kept their Christmas trees in the attic and skipped the holiday altogether.

But I'm not buying that. Christmas isn't about a tree, shopping, stockings, eggnog, gingerbread, parties, toys, Santa Claus, elves, gift cards, wreaths or snow. Christmas is the warmth, joy and gratitude we feel because Jesus Christ was born. No virus can cancel it. No tyrant can outlaw it. No Grinch can steal it. No Scrooge can humbug it.

I will forever celebrate Christmas in my heart, even in the middle of a pandemic. I will rejoice no matter what this year has been like.

2020 wasn't easy for me. I make my living from traveling, so most of my schedule was canceled in March. But the Bible calls us to rejoice in the Lord no matter what is happening around us. In fact, Paul wrote those very words, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" from a prison cell (Phil. 4:4).

If the apostle can rejoice while bound in chains, I certainly can celebrate in a pandemic. Here are seven reasons I choose to rejoice at the end of a horrible year:

1. **We have a powerful Savior.** Christmas is Christmas,

whether we have big dinners together or celebrate alone. God became flesh and dwelt among us. Rejoice in the fact that Jesus came to earth and that He has saved you from sin and death.

2. **His blessings are overflowing.** Psalm 103:2 says, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.” Have you thanked Him this year for health, protection, financial provision and all the other ways He has cared for you?
3. **The church has thrived in a challenging season.** In spite of canceled services and empty church buildings, we’ve learned to use technology in 2020 so that our outreach extends farther than ever. We would never have learned these new methods of ministry if the pandemic hadn’t force us to change.
4. **God’s people are praying in unprecedented ways.** The challenges of 2020 drew many Christians into their prayer closets. We went deeper in intimacy with God. Prayer is arising like floodwaters all over the world, preparing us for a great spiritual awakening.
5. **The Holy Spirit is still moving.** God’s Spirit has not been social distancing during this pandemic. He has been drawing people to faith in Christ during these dark times. In 2020 I led an immigrant to Jesus, and he is now sharing his faith with his friends in India.
6. **Jesus is still on the throne.** No matter who occupies the White House, Isaiah 9:6 says of the Messiah: “...the government shall be upon His shoulder.” Don’t let an election steal your joy. If your candidate didn’t win, God can still protect our freedoms and guide our nation back to Him.
7. **His light shines in the darkness.** I hated 2020 mostly because of all the hatefulness and political conflict

that raged in our streets and in our social media posts. Relationships were severed this year because of strife; even families have been divided. Yet we know that when the darkness gets darker, God's light shines brighter. We can rejoice that in the midst of chaos, confusion and moral depravity, the message of the gospel will become even clearer in contrast.

2020 wasn't easy, but we will find many sweet surprises in this bitter year if we learn to rejoice in every situation. I pray you have a Merry Christmas! {eoa}

Never Downplay the Virgin Birth of Jesus

We hear a lot about science these days. Politicians remind us constantly that we all must "trust the science" when it comes to wearing masks and staying six feet away from each other. Because viral infection is a scientific reality, I talk to my elderly mother through a window at her nursing home rather than visiting her in person. Science tells me there are risks if I'm not careful around the elderly.

I respect science. But as a Christian, I also know there are times when God steps into our scientific world and overrides the laws of nature. The Bible is full of these baffling moments. They are called miracles.

Many scientists today don't believe in miracles. Evolutionary

biologist Richard Dawkins, for example, called the miracles of the Bible “religious propaganda.” Physicist Stephen Hawking, who died in 2018, rejected the possibility of miracles.

And yet the Christian faith rests on the belief that God sovereignly broke scientific rules in two dramatic instances: One, in the virgin birth of Jesus; and two, in His bodily resurrection.

I was in the hospital room for the births of each of my four daughters. I had little to do in the delivery room. My wife was the hero. She sweated, strained, pushed and gasped for hours while I patted her arm and tried not to get queasy from seeing all the blood. Normal births are amazing, whether they occur in hospitals or homes or the back seats of taxis.

But when I consider the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, I’m in total awe—not just because of Mary and Joseph’s bumpy ride from Nazareth, Mary’s lack of a doctor (or anesthesia) and the crudeness of the manger, but also because of how Jesus was conceived. Mary was a virgin. Joseph, the “father,” had nothing to do but stand in the background.

Secularists and liberal theologians have mocked the virgin birth for centuries. Thomas Jefferson called it a fable, while Episcopal heretic John Shelby Spong called it an “entrance myth.” The concept of a woman giving birth to a baby without a man’s involvement is ludicrous to unbelievers. It contradicts all the laws of biology.

Yet Mary was not a scoffer. She asked the angel how she would bear this child, and he said: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35, NASB).

I would have asked for more scientific information. (“Thanks Gabriel, but how exactly does this miraculous impregnation work?”) But Mary didn’t worry about details. She believed Gabriel’s announcement and submitted to God in childlike

faith.

The Greek word for “overshadow,” *episkiazo*, is a reference to the cloud of God’s presence that materialized in Moses’ tabernacle. The Amplified Bible translates Luke 1:35 as: He “will overshadow you like a shining cloud.” This same cloud hovered over the ark of the covenant, led God’s people through the wilderness and filled Solomon’s temple with shimmering glory.

The same cloud of glory that caused Moses’ face to shine hovered over a virgin and deposited a divine seed in her womb. The God who hid behind a veil in the Old Testament clothed Himself in human flesh in the New Testament.

The Incarnation cannot be explained in purely biological terms. There was nothing sexual about it, yet Mary’s ovum was fertilized without Joseph’s sperm. Divinity merged with humanity. Jesus, fully God and fully man, began a nine-month gestation. The virgin birth is not a trivial detail in the story of Jesus. It is a cornerstone of our faith. If it didn’t happen, Jesus wouldn’t be the Son of God. Everything we believe about salvation would be false if Jesus hadn’t been divinely conceived.

When He was born, there was a normal amount of blood, sweat and tears—because Mary was human. But this birth was surrounded with wonder because Joseph was not the father. He came from a line of kings, but his pedigree was not enough to save the human race. He could not contribute to this miracle.

Doubters think Joseph got Mary pregnant out of wedlock. If that were true, Christianity itself would be a lie because (1) if Jesus were not born of a woman, He could not have identified with our sins fully; and (2) if God were not His biological father, Jesus could not have redeemed us.

Bible teacher R.T. Kendall put it this way: “The virgin birth of Christ shows that salvation can never come through human

effort.” God did it all without our help. All we can do is receive His amazing love and forgiveness. I hope you have a Merry Christmas as you celebrate this science-defying miracle.
{eoa}

If God Hasn't Answered Yet, Keep Asking

Over the years I've seen countless answers to prayer, both for me and for friends and family members I pray for regularly. I've seen healings, job openings, reconciled marriages, real estate sales, engagements, supernatural provision, divine protection and so many other miracles. I don't question whether God answers prayer.

But I also have a list of prayer requests in my phone that haven't been answered yet. I've prayed for some of these things for several years. If I'm honest, sometimes I get discouraged about this.

I'm tempted to think God isn't listening.

If this has been your prayer experience, you aren't alone. You've been enrolled in the School of Persevering Prayer, and it's not a one-semester class. It's a lifelong journey designed to stretch your faith, develop your character, purify your motives, test your patience and increase your capacity to experience God's amazing love.

I've been in this school for a long time. I think I may have failed a few classes, and I've been required to repeat them.

Recently I was whining about God's delays. For many months I've been bringing the same requests to the Lord, yet the answers seem impossibly distant. My faith wavers from calm assurance to frustrated doubt. In my weakest moments I panic and say stupid things that I regret later, such as: "I'm quitting!"

There's just no way around the fact that prayer requires persistence. One friend of mine even coined a phrase to summarize this painful fact: "God is in the waiting."

Jesus told a parable about an unrighteous judge who granted a poor widow's petition because she badgered him night and day (see Luke 18:1-8). Jesus asked: "Will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night?" (v. 7, NASB). Whatever request you have brought to the Lord, and regardless of how many times you have reminded Him of it, keep these three points in mind as you trust Him to answer:

1. **God's work takes time.** Most people in the Bible who asked God for big things waited years to receive their answers. Abraham turned gray waiting for his promised heir—and he is called the father of our faith. Joshua and his remnant company wandered in the wilderness 40 years before they possessed Canaan. Hannah endured taunts from Peninnah and insults from Eli while she prayed many years for a son.

Prayer isn't a magic formula. We don't wave a wand and say, "abracadabra" to get an instant answer. Your job is to ask, not to dictate or control. You must let God be God. You must let patience have its perfect work. You will eventually reap if you don't grow weary.

2. **Authentic prayer involves a holy process.** Prayer is often compared to birth. When God gives you a promise,

you essentially become pregnant with it. If you plan to carry this promise to term, you must wait—and then you must travail.

Surely this is what the apostle Paul experienced when he told the Galatians he would be “in labor” until Christ was formed in them (Gal. 4:19). We often think of the prayer of faith as triggering instant answers, but this was not the case with Paul. While God can certainly answer immediately, He often asks us to carry a promise until we are mature enough to handle the answer.

3. You have a helper who is praying for you. You are not in this process alone. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us, Paul wrote, “with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26b, MEV). He is praying the perfect will of God, and we are invited to agree with Him. This kind of gut-wrenching prayer is messy and full of anguish; it is not formal or sophisticated.

When we truly pray in the Holy Ghost, we surrender our agendas and allow Him to pray through us. And this takes us deeper with God.

Have you ever been around a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy? She is often in a state of agitation—ready to give birth but weary of the strain. I know many Christians today who are in this same uncomfortable stage of spiritual travail. They’ve held onto promises for a long time. Some are in despair because the gestation period has been so long.

Jesus said: “For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Matt. 7:8). The verbs used are Greek present imperatives, meaning constant asking, seeking and knocking. Prevailing prayer requires persistence, but when we feel too weak to press forward in faith, the Spirit provides the extra push. You are not the only one praying.

You may be asking for the salvation of a wayward child, the funding of a ministry, the reconciliation of a relationship, the recovery of a business, the reviving of a stagnant church or the healing of a sick loved one. Or if you are really adventurous you may be praying for our nation, which is battling unprecedented spiritual darkness.

You're closer than you've ever been to a breakthrough. Keep on knocking. Don't give up. The God who moves mountains has heard your cry. {eoa}

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