

10 Powerful Questions to Ask as You Start 2019

When a year ends, I always take time to evaluate what God did in my life. I celebrate the highlights by looking at photos, savoring memories and writing down the best moments. Then I mourn my losses. I also carefully consider any mistakes I made and how I can grow spiritually in the coming year.

I see this principle of self-evaluation in Psalm 119:59, which says: "I consider my ways, and I turn my feet to Your testimonies." Lamentations 3:40 adds: "Let us search and try our ways, and return to the Lord!" And the apostle Paul told the Corinthians: "Examine yourselves, seeing whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5a).

Yet I hear few preachers today urging people to make serious self-examinations. Today, we are the armchair critics of everything else, but we rarely look inward.

British preacher Charles Spurgeon told his congregation in the 1800s: "Most people have seen themselves in a looking-glass, but there is another looking-glass, which gives true reflections, into which few men look. To study oneself in the light of God's Word, and carefully go over one's condition ... would be a very healthy exercise."

As you begin this new year, conduct your own self-examination by asking yourself these tough questions:

1. Have I made time alone with God a priority? Fires don't last long if you don't regularly pile wood on the flames. You can't survive spiritually without regular communion with the Lord. If you neglected prayer or reading God's Word in 2018, make a decision today to rekindle your devotional life.

2. Did I develop bad habits that need to be broken? Paul told

the Thessalonians, “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thess. 5:19). Are you doing anything that is extinguishing the Spirit’s flames in your life?

3. In what areas do I need to grow spiritually? 2 Corinthians 3:18 says you “are being transformed ... from glory to glory.” God wants to take you to a new level. Have you been struggling with anger, anxiety, fear, doubt or resentment? Are certain attitudes dragging you down? Identify the spiritual strongholds in your life and ask Jesus to replace them with the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

4. What are my spiritual gifts, and am I using them? Every Christian has spiritual gifts—and you are no exception. Don’t bury your talents. You must face your fears and stretch your faith as you begin to step out, but soon you will find there is no greater joy than being an instrument of the Holy Spirit to bless people.

5. Do I need a mentor to help me? You cannot get where you need to be all by yourself. We all need role models, teachers and encouragers. I love to hang around zealous, passionate Christians whose spiritual heat is contagious. Sometimes I make appointments with them so I can glean from their wisdom and experience. Get as close as possible to those who can help you grow.

6. How did I influence others for Christ in the past year? My greatest joy in life is investing in others—especially as I grow older and realize that life is “not about me.” Jesus said our mission is to “make disciples” (Matt. 28:19), yet most Christians never really make a mark on anyone. If you aren’t currently making disciples, look around and ask God to show you your harvest field.

7. How can I avoid the mistakes of the past? You don’t have to stay stuck in the ruts of 2018. Repent for your moments of weakness. Turn away from your willful sins and then run back

into the Father's arms. God has forgiven you, and you can move forward! Your new year can truly be a new beginning.

8. Am I aligned with the right people? God called us to be in community. Don't live in isolation. But make sure you are in a church that is on fire for God. If your church compromises God's Word or ignores the Great Commission, you should find a new church home.

9. What is God saying to me as I enter this New Year? God knows you, and He knows your future. He also knows the challenges you face and the storms that may come this year. 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." God loves you. If you seek Him, He will speak a word to your heart—and that word will propel you into a new season.

10. What goals do I need to make? People with goals have a sense of purpose. But those with no ambitions wander aimlessly. Setting a goal is the first step toward success. But make sure to write your goals down. State them clearly, and then aim at them. The prophet said in Habakkuk 2:2b: "Write the vision, and make it plain on tablets, that he who reads it may run."

I pray God will give you fresh strength to run the race of faith in 2019.

Warning: Upcoming Turbulence

in 2019

I despise airplane turbulence. Even though I enjoy high-speed roller coasters, there is something about hurling through stormy skies in a commercial jetliner at 37,000 feet that turns my knuckles white. This is why I always ask for a window seat. Whenever we hit rough air and the seat belt sign flashes on, I feel safer if I can look outside.

But that didn't help me on a recent overseas flight. I was not aware that rough weather was raging below. All I knew was that our journey through the dark vacuum of space reminded me of Doctor Doom's Fearfall—a theme park ride I have enjoyed many times in Orlando. (That ride lasts only a few seconds, and it is firmly bolted to the ground. The stomach-churning turbulence over the Atlantic Ocean lasted half an hour.)

It was 11 p.m., and I couldn't see anything outside my window except horizontal rain. I kept reminding myself that the pilot was using radar and other high-tech instruments to avoid crashing into the sea. I recalled a conversation with my brother-in-law, a Delta pilot. He assured me that no one dies in turbulence.

But my knuckles did not believe this. I clutched the armrest, prayed and—for a few seconds—wondered how my wife would plan my funeral.

Of course the plane did not break apart in midair. When we descended below the cloud cover, and the lights of civilization became visible, all my color returned. I breathed a prayer of thanksgiving when I heard the familiar sound of wheels touching the runway.

You may not share my fear of turbulence, but all of us have walked through scary times in life when we couldn't see the path in front of us. Many people I know are going through such times right now. Some are facing job loss, financial

hardships, health problems or unusual spiritual challenges.

Meanwhile, many churches today are finding it hard to navigate change. More people than ever are in a season of transition because old business models don't work and ministry paradigms are shifting. On top of that, the world is going through unprecedented political and economic shaking. You can expect more of that in this new year.

It's not going to be easy. There are going to be some roller-coaster moments in this season. My best advice is to put on your seat belts now.

Some of us find ourselves digging our fingernails into the armrest while the plane bounces all over the stormy sky. And when we look out the window, we see nothing but darkness.

I have found my comfort in the words David penned after he escaped from Saul's pursuits. He wrote in Psalm 18:4,6: "The cords of death encircled me, and the torrents of destruction terrified me ... In my distress I called on the Lord, and cried for help to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry for help came to His ears."

In describing God's just-in-the-nick-of-time rescue, David borrowed imagery from the day when God opened the Red Sea. "The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High gave His voice ... Then the channels of water appeared, and the foundations of the world were discovered ... He sent from above, He took me; He drew me out of many waters ... He also brought me forth also into a large place; He delivered me because He delighted in me" (v. 13,15,16,19).

David's transition wasn't easy. In his most difficult moment, he realized God had "made darkness His hiding place" (v. 11, NASB). We must remember that darkness is not a sign that God is not with us. It became stormy just before the Red Sea split open. Yet God was working behind the scenes, even when the clouds were black and the wind was violent.

As we enter this turbulent time of transition, hold tightly to this promise. You can trust Him. In yet a little while, He will intervene. Don't focus on your job crisis, the bad economic news, your lack of options or the bumpiness of the ride. When His lightning flashes, He will split the obstacles in front of you and make a dry roadbed in the middle of the sea. He can make a way where there is no way.

Don't try to handle the anxiety yourself. Ask the Lord to carry you. Turbulence never lasts forever. Eventually you will hear the sound of wheels touching down on the wet runway. Although you are helpless to make this transition on your own, your Deliverer will safely carry you from your present crisis into a broad place of future blessing.

Give Christmas More Meaning—With Music

I love Christmas music. I love it so much that I start listening to my playlist the last week of October—because 1) I'm not a fan of Halloween, and 2) I want to spread holiday cheer for as long as possible. I have almost every genre of music in my collection—including 1940s Big Band, 1950s rock, Bing Crosby, country and Kirk Franklin, along with more contemporary tracks.

Radio stations play “holiday” music 24 hours a day, but many of these songs don't even mention the reason for the season. We hear lyrics about snow, icicles and winter weather (even though Christmas is hot in most parts of the world), overcoats, shopping, sleighs, Santa Claus, reindeer, toys, holly, elves, bells, chipmunks and pumpkin pie.

I don't mind the secular songs. One of my favorite Christmas albums is Nat King Cole's *The Christmas Song* from 1963. But while it features classics like "Jingle Bells," "Deck the Halls" and the famous title track about chestnuts roasting on an open fire, it also offers 10 carols that are unapologetically Christian. (Nat King Cole's father was a Baptist minister, and the singer's faith obviously affected his career.)

There was a time in our history when Christmas music was mostly spiritual. People actually sat around fireplaces, gathered on street corners or met in churches to sing carols that made overt references to the birth of Jesus. I love those songs the most, and I encourage you to enrich your Christmas with the classic music that has been passed down for many years. Here are some of the "greatest hits" that capture the essence of the season:

"O Holy Night." This stirring anthem isn't easy to sing unless you're a professionally trained tenor—and that's why I prefer listening to this version by Josh Groban. It gives me goosebumps every time I hear it. Composed in 1847, it glorifies the incarnation of Christ and contains a powerful, prophetic denouncement of slavery: "Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother/ and in His name all oppression shall cease." A 1906 version of this carol was the first song ever played on the radio.

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel." Originally written in Latin in the 12th century, this majestic carol reminds us how the Jews yearned for the coming of the Messiah: "O come, Thou Rod of Jesse free/ Thine own from Satan's tyranny/ from depths of hell Thy people save/ and give them victory o'er the grave." Few hymns are as rich in biblical imagery. Irish singer Enya's version is one of the best because it maintains the medieval style.

"The First Noel." Christmas carols were originally used as

lessons to narrate the story of Christ's birth. This song describes the shepherds, angels, wise men and the Christ child in masterful poetry—and reminds us that the Savior “hath made heaven and earth of nought/ and with His blood mankind hath bought.” (The word Noel, or “Nowell” in 18th-century English, means Christmas.) Here is Ella Fitzgerald's take on this classic.

“It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” Penned in 1849, this carol had deep meaning in the United States at a time when tensions were mounting between North and South. It emphasizes that the message of the angels at Christ's birth was about peace and reconciliation: “And man, at war with man, hears not/ the love-song which they bring/ O hush the noise, ye men of strife/ and hear the angels sing.” Johnny Mathis' 1958 version is amazing.

“O Little Town of Bethlehem.” An Episcopal priest from Philadelphia wrote this carol after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1865. It reminds us of how God used such an insignificant place to stage the miracle of redemption. (“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!”) Nat King Cole recorded one of the best renditions of this song.

“Joy to the World”: Penned by Isaac Watts in 1719, it was not intended to be a Christmas carol. Yet today it is the most widely published Christmas hymn. It is based on Psalm 98 and celebrates Christ's victory through His Second Coming with powerful words like this: “He rules the world with truth and grace/ and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness.” There have been many pop recordings of this carol (I love Whitney Houston's gospel rendition), but the one by Andy Williams is a personal favorite.

“Hark the Herald Angels Sing!” Charles Wesley, founder of Methodism, wrote this song in 1739, but it had a somber melody. The livelier version we sing was composed in 1840. This hymn packs a theological punch in every line, with

references to the incarnation, the Trinity and regeneration: "Christ by highest heav'n adored/ Christ the everlasting Lord!/ Late in time behold Him come; offspring of a virgin's womb." Amy Grant released a perfect version of this carol way back in 1983.

"Sweet Little Jesus Boy." Written in the style of old Negro spirituals, this song captures the essence of Christmas from the perspective of distant observers—and reminds us that Christmas is not about white European culture. Mahalia Jackson's soulful rendition is one of the most authentic.

"What Child Is This?" William Chatterton Dix wrote this song in 1865 after a bout with depression. It was later set to the famous 16th-century English melody, "Greensleeves." Rather than retelling the Christmas story, it calls us to participate in it: "So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh/ Come, peasant, king, to own Him/ the King of kings salvation brings/ Let loving hearts enthrone Him." Michael W. Smith did a moving rendition of this song with Martina McBride.

"Angels We Have Heard on High." This hymn was translated into English in 1862 from a French carol, and is best known for its Latin refrain, "Gloria in excelsis Deo" ("Glory to God in the highest"). My favorite version of this carol is a rousing black gospel rendition by Sandra Crouch, sister of Andrae Crouch.

I encourage you not to rush through the holidays without listening to the songs that give Christmas its true meaning.

Please Stop Demonizing Christmas

During a recent trip to El Salvador, a pastor and I were talking about how much we both love Christmas music. We shared some of the songs on our personal playlists, and then he told me that his wife is especially fond of songs like “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year” and “Let It Snow” because the church she grew up in discouraged members from celebrating Christmas or hanging any type of holiday decorations.

Her story reminded me that several *Charisma* readers jumped on me a few years ago after I wrote a column about Christmas. They were angry because they consider Christmas a pagan holiday that is luring gift-giving revelers into hell itself. One person who identified himself as “Albert” wrote in our online forum that he “isn’t comfortable celebrating Christmas” because of its “demonic origins.”

You probably know there are many Christians who boycott Christmas for various reasons—some factual and some quite debatable. These people insist:

- The holiday has become too commercialized and promotes greed. (I can’t really argue with that.)
- No one knows when Jesus was born. (True—and the Bible is silent about the date.) However, “Albert” and other anti-Christmas purists insist Jesus was born on Sept. 11, in 3 B.C., during Rosh Hoshana.
- The Dec. 25 date was chosen to “Christianize” the pagan celebration of Saturnalia, an ancient winter solstice festival. (Probably true—but is there anything wrong with Christianizing something? I’m glad a pagan celebration was replaced.)
- Christmas trees are a pagan tradition, since druids believed evergreen boughs were magical and had the power

to scare away demons. (“Thursday” is also named for the Norse god Thor, but that doesn’t mean I worship him when I use the word.)

- Dec. 25 is the birthday of Nimrod, who later became known as the pagan god Baal, who later became known as Nicolas, who later became known as Santa Claus. For this reason, we can be sure that demons lurk behind all wreaths, candles, ornaments, fruitcakes, sleighs or anyone dressed in red and green.
- “Santa” is just a jumbled misspelling of “Satan”! (Seriously?)

In all fairness to these Christmas critics, I will admit I never encouraged my children to believe in Santa Claus. This was not because I was afraid he was Baal, Nimrod or an ancient Turkish bishop in disguise, but because 1) I felt I would be lying to my kids if I told them Santa brought them gifts; 2) I hate standing in lines at department stores; and 3) the prospect of inviting a strange old man into my house so he can “check” on my sleeping daughters is downright creepy.

But I unashamedly love Christmas. I love the trees, the ornaments, the lights, the smells, the eggnog, the music, the gifts and the family and friends who share the celebration with me. All the decorations point me to Jesus—from the bells on the front porch to the angel on top of the tree to the plastic manger scene that shows some wear (mainly because our dachshund, Flapjack, chewed a shepherd’s head off in 1996.)

For me, Christmas is a wondrous time of year when I ponder the miracle of Christ’s birth and, hopefully, get lots of chances to share his generous love with people who are less fortunate than I am.

People have been fighting about Christmas for a long time. Christmas gift-giving was condemned by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages because of the “pagan origins” of the holiday. Then, anti-Catholic Puritans declared war on

Christmas in England and banned it from 1647 to 1660, calling it “a popish festival with no justification.” In the United States, Puritans outlawed Christmas in Massachusetts from 1659 to 1681, and it was an unpopular holiday after the Revolutionary War because Americans associated it with England.

Christmas became a federal holiday in 1870. Yet today, in spite of the fact that Christmas has morphed into a meaningless mush of secularized snowflakes, reindeer, penguins, gift cards and year-end sales, the Scrooges of our day want to suck all the remaining Christian spirituality out of it.

I expect atheists to hate Christmas. I know they will try to ban nativity scenes from public parks or remove Christmas carols from classrooms. But it is downright tragic when Christians—who should welcome every opportunity to bring the miracle of Jesus’ incarnation into public life—start bah-humbugging (or even demonizing) the holiday.

Keep Christmas in your own way, by all means. If it’s offensive to you to hang mistletoe from your mantle or to send a Christmas card to friends, then don’t. I won’t judge you for that. But please don’t judge other believers simply because they want to celebrate all that is pure and decent and meaningful this special time of year.

P.S. Merry Christmas!

In Today’s Culture, You Are

What You 'Identify As'

Last month, a Dutch man, Emile Ratelband, asked a court in the Netherlands to permit him to change his legal age from 69 to 49. He said he "feels 49," and he said his doctor agrees that he looks young for his age. Ratelband complained that he has suffered from age discrimination—especially when looking for dates with women online.

Comparing himself to transgender people who change their sexual identity, Ratelband claimed in his lawsuit that age is not a fixed reality. "Time is just a figure," he said. "I say it is not fixed."

Unfortunately for Ratelband's dating life, the Dutch court ruled against him this week. While recognizing that "some people today feel fit and healthy in their old age," the judges did not regard this as a valid argument for amending a person's age. They affirmed that Ratelband's birthdate is still fixed at March 11, 1949.

We can be thankful that these Dutch judges ruled on the side of sanity. But in today's bizarre world of "self-identification," Mr. Ratelband's attempt to alter reality will likely become more common. Consider these recent examples:

- We all remember Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who pretended to be black while leading the local NAACP chapter in Washington state. When her deception was exposed in 2015, she told reporters that she "identifies as black"—as if her personal feelings about her race can automatically overrule genetics.

Dolezal later explained that she believes race is "a social construct" that has no basis in science. She said: "I really just prefer to be exactly who I am, and black is the closest race and cultural category that represents the essence of who I am."

- In November, controversial Irish singer Sinead O'Connor went on a racist rant on Twitter, announcing that "white people are disgusting." The former pop star said, "I never want to spend time with white people again," even though she herself is white. Known for her shaved head, O'Connor said she has changed her name to Shuhada' Davitt and has started wearing a head covering because she is now a Muslim.
- You may never have heard of "therians," but it probably won't be long before you meet one. Therians don't believe they are humans, and they celebrate their animal identity on their Instagram pages and YouTube channels. One Norwegian woman named Nano said she realized at age 16 that she has been a cat all her life. She walks on all fours and claims she can see in the dark and hear things humans can't.

Dennis Avner, a famous therian who committed suicide in 2012, was so convinced he was a cat that he had his ears reshaped, got whiskers implanted and had cat stripes tattooed all over his body. (Today there are also "polytherians" who identify as more than one animal.)

- Things are becoming even more confusing when it comes to gender. Ever since athlete Bruce Jenner announced in 2015 that he was transitioning from male to female, the trans movement has exploded. There are now officially 63 different designations for gender on record. One of those, "gender fluid," refers to a person who believes they are a mix of both genders and that their gender designation is not fixed.

What do we make of all this? For centuries people have assumed that things like gender, age and race are set realities based on science. Yet today all absolutes are being questioned.

More and more, in this selfie age, the self has become the standard. The new mantra is: "I can choose who I am. I am what

I 'feel.' If I 'feel' like I am 49, I am 49—no matter what my birth certificate says. If I 'feel' like I am a dog, I am a dog. I determine reality.”

I'm not shocked when I see this trend in our culture. The Bible warned us this would happen. The apostle Paul predicted that in the last days “men will become lovers of themselves” (2 Tim. 3:2). When we reject God and focus on ourselves, we actually lose our true identity. We cannot possibly know who we really are if we cut ourselves off from the Creator.

Without a connection to the true God, we become hopelessly disoriented and confused. This only hope for this growing confusion in our culture is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is not a time to judge people. Don't get angry at those who “identify” as something else. Love them anyway—and introduce them to the one who can restore their true identity. In the midst of today's selfishness, sexual confusion and family breakdown, Jesus has given us a chance to show His love to people who don't know who they are.

Don't Ignore This Key to Spiritual Awakening

This past Sunday night, a small miracle occurred in my hometown of LaGrange, Georgia. Christians from dozens of different denominations and ethnic backgrounds gathered at First Baptist Church—the biggest church in town—to thank God for His goodness and to intentionally shatter divisions.

Cade Farris, the pastor of First Baptist, was beaming from ear to ear when he welcomed the people as they streamed into the

auditorium. Yet Farris didn't preach. He gave his pulpit to two African-American ministers from the city, along with pastors from Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist backgrounds.

The five preachers were given only seven minutes each to speak on the subject of thanksgiving, from Psalm 100. But when pastor Lamar Hardwick of the nondenominational New Community Church preached, he shared some of his time with the audience. "I'm giving up some of my time because I want y'all to praise God!" Hardwick said, inviting people to stand for an undignified celebration.

People all over the building clapped and shouted praises, lifting their hands in the air. In that moment, this didn't feel like my grandmother's Baptist church. But nobody complained.

I've been in many worship services with talented music teams. But there was something special about this night. Five different teams led us in praise—including a group from a local Spanish congregation, another from a Pentecostal church, and a multi-racial band led by a young African-American woman.

With every song, it felt as if Jericho's walls were falling. At one point, the atmosphere was so thick with God's presence that people had to sit down. That was right before Pastor Cade called four people to the podium to read Psalm 100 in languages spoken by immigrants in our community—Korean, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish.

LaGrange, which is about 45 minutes southwest of Atlanta, is a quiet, working-class community of 30,000. Most churches are still segregated, even though the population is almost equally black and white, with an added Korean minority due to the nearby Kia plant.

Nobody had to address the elephant in the room. We know LaGrange is divided. But Brazilian youth pastor Nelson Furtado stated the obvious before reading Psalm 100 in Portuguese. "We

are one family," he said. "This is what heaven looks like."

I had a profound experience at the closing of the service, when everyone in the auditorium joined hands across the aisles to pray. I heard in my spirit the creaking of a huge old door. I sensed the Lord saying to me: "I am opening the door of Pentecost to this city."

I don't believe this promise is just for my small town, either. In this season of intense political division, the Lord is calling His people to a new level of connection.

I'm not talking about a contrived show of unity where we just smile at each other once a year and go home. What we need is authentic togetherness combined with heartfelt repentance for our divisions. God wants the church to get serious about tearing down the walls of race, denominationalism and politics.

The Bible tells us the secret of Pentecost. Before the wind of the Holy Spirit rushed into the Upper Room, an otherworldly unity knit the hearts of the early disciples. "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place" (Acts 2:1, KJV).

The phrase "in one accord" comes from the Greek word *homothymadon*, which literally refers to musical harmony. The Spirit manifests His power when God's people play the same song the conductor is playing! He does not want us simply in unity with each other; true unity is only possible when we are on the same page with Him.

Do we want another Pentecost? We must come together. We must worship together. We must put aside the hurts of the past, the awkward racial tensions and the bitter divisions between Republicans and Democrats. It is time to dismantle what separates us.

This also means pastors must stop building their small

fiefdoms and recognize that God's vast kingdom includes all born-again believers. There is only one true church. Ephesians 4:4 says: "There is one body and one Spirit, even as you were called in one hope of your calling."

We are one. We must start acting like it, or we will miss the moment of our visitation.

How a Trip to the Holy Land Changed My Life

I traveled to Israel more than 20 years ago. But this month, my wife and I took a 13-day trip there with a group of American friends. I'd already seen the typical tourist sites in Jerusalem, and honestly, I was not looking forward to standing in long lines to see Jesus' tomb. (Sometimes the Holy Land can feel like a religious version of Disney World—especially on crowded days.)

A friend of mine from Puerto Rico says that once you visit the Holy Land, the Bible "goes from black and white to color." That is exactly what happened to me—from the moment I watched a group of fishermen clean their nets on their boat on the Sea of Galilee. It feels like I got a new pair of glasses. When I read the Bible now, certain words jump off the page that I never noticed.

Our trip took us from Haifa in the northwest to the Dead Sea in the east. Not only did we tour some of the more popular destinations like Capernaum, Nazareth and the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, but we also stopped at Elijah's Cave in Haifa, Mount Gerizim in Samaria and Elisha's Spring in Jericho—the place where the prophet healed the poisonous

waters. We even explored the ruins of Magdala, believed to be the birthplace of Mary Magdalene.

I came back from this trip wishing I could return—and hoping that my friends can make a similar pilgrimage. I guarantee a visit to the Holy Land is worth the investment, but I would recommend the following:

1. Make sure you have a skilled guide. Tourism is a huge industry in Israel. In October of this year, Israel reported its largest number of tourists ever. That means there are some people giving tours who may be doing it for the wrong reasons. I strongly recommend you arrange for a guide who is a committed Christian. Our guide grew up in the land and is a Spirit-filled believer. He knows the Bible, history and geography.

2. Read the gospels while you are there. Many scholars say the Holy Land is “the fifth gospel”—which means the land itself is a witness of Christ. I decided to read the Gospel of Matthew while I was there. Even though I have always believed the words of Scripture are true, they became even more inspired for me when I saw the hillside where Jesus fed the multitude, and I visited the ruins of the house where Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law.

3. Connect with the “living stones,” not just the old ruins. My trip to Israel was actually not just for tourism. We were able to connect with Christians in the land—on both sides of the current political conflict. One of my favorite moments was worshipping with both Israeli and Arab believers who have found common ground in their love for Jesus. Even though the church is small in the Holy Land, and struggling, God is moving powerfully among His people. If you go, do everything you can to encourage and strengthen the body of Christ while you are there.

4. Try to avoid the crowds. Our tour guide did a masterful job

of taking us to places that are off the beaten path. We hiked near the Sea of Galilee and sat on rocks near where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. When we went to Bethlehem, we spent most of our time in Beit Sahour, “the place of the sleepless,” where the shepherds learned that Jesus had been born. Everyone visits the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, but when we went to Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast, we almost had the place to ourselves. That’s the site where Peter prayed for a group of Gentiles to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

5. Don’t avoid the Palestinian areas. My favorite part of this trip was visiting places that are considered off-limits by many tourists. Christian pilgrims often avoid the Palestinian areas because of fear or prejudice. But what they don’t realize is that Arab Christians actually are a key to the spiritual awakening in this land.

For centuries, Palestinian believers have preserved the Christian sites in modern Israel—and many biblical sites are located in the Palestinian territories. These include Bethlehem; the ruins of Jericho; the Judean wilderness where Jesus was tempted; the site of Jesus’ baptism; and the ancient city of Sychar, in modern Nablus—where the Samaritan woman talked with Jesus at Jacob’s well. That place alone was worth the price of my trip!

I met some wonderful Palestinian believers during my visit. They love Jesus but they feel forgotten by American Christians. They also speak Arabic, which means they have a greater chance of sharing the gospel with Muslims than anyone else in Israel. They need our prayers, our love and our support. Don’t ignore them when you visit their homeland.

How to React When the Church Fails You

During the 1980s I was part of a vibrant Christian ministry that focused on reaching university students. The people involved were passionate for Jesus, excited about evangelism and eager to send missionaries to the world. There is no question that we were a revival movement. But flawed human beings were involved—and because most of us were under 30 we had no idea what we were doing!

We were idealistic, untrained and horribly naive. As a result, many mistakes were made. Scripture was misused. Judgments were hurled. People got hurt. Marriages fell apart. Churches closed. And some people never got over the fact that Christians did mean things to each other.

Everywhere I go, I meet Christians who were hurt in church or wounded by the words and actions of leaders. Some of these people are bitter. Others have given up on church. Some have even left the faith. And a few suffer from the spiritual equivalent of post-traumatic stress disorder. If you or someone you love has been hurt in church, I recommend taking these steps:

1. Forgive from your heart. The first step is always forgiveness. Don't fall into the trap of justifying your right to be offended. You may be tempted to scream: "But you don't understand what they did to me!" God understands—but He requires you to let go of the hurt. The Word is clear: "Even as Christ forgave you, so you must do" (Col. 3:13b).

2. Learn from the other person's mistakes. I have mentors who taught me much about God, leadership and ministry. But I also have learned a lot from watching the mistakes leaders make. If someone in ministry hurts you, make a mental note: "That is

not the way I want to treat people.” You can actually turn your disappointments into blessings if you learn from them.

3. Remain humble. Pride thrives in bitter soil. If you allow anger or resentment to lodge in your heart, it won't be long before your character is completely poisoned. Your desire to prove your point will inflate your ego—and God will resist you. Paul told the Galatians: “For if someone thinks himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal. 6:3). Don't let someone else's mistake turn you into a monster.

4. Try to make peace. Never let an offense destroy a relationship. It's childish just to walk away. Does the leader know how he or she hurt you? Make an appointment and share your heart. Give the other person a chance to apologize or give an explanation. Our tendency is always to magnify the other person's mistakes while we excuse our own behavior. It's never wise to break a relationship without making every effort at reconciliation. If you feel you can't talk to the person because of intimidation, write a letter and explain the situation.

5. Stay in fellowship. The devil is a wolf—he isolates his victims before he attacks. Many people who are hurt by leaders leave church altogether. It's OK to take a short break to recover. But if you go two months, then six months, then a year without being in close fellowship with other Christians, you are making yourself vulnerable. You may be tempted to believe that there are no healthy pastors or churches in your area—but I dare you to disprove that.

6. Get godly counsel. It is never wise to walk through a relationship breakup without getting an outside perspective. You may think you are the victim—until a friend points out your own blind spots. Share what happened with trusted, spiritually mature people and ask them how you should respond. If what a leader did to you was criminal (like sexual abuse or

financial exploitation), you may have to consult a lawyer. But in most cases, you will simply need to forgive and renounce any desire for revenge. Practice Romans 12:17a: “Repay no one evil for evil.”

7. Break free from manipulation. Sometimes immature leaders make harsh judgments against church members. Other leaders use their authority to punish what they perceive as disloyalty—and the person feels cursed. Inappropriate words like this have the power to maim people spiritually. If this has happened to you, ask a pastor or mature friend to pray for you and break the power of these words so you can be healed.

8. Move on. I’ve met Christians who still nurse the same grudges after 30 years. They keep their pain alive by reliving the offense over and over. As a result, they are stuck in a time warp, and no one wants to be around them because their sarcasm is so toxic. You must let go. Say what Jesus said on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Don’t let disappointment in others lock you in an unhappy past when God has a joyful future for you. Leave your offenses at the cross, and don’t let anyone’s mistakes prevent you from being a part of a healthy church.

Jesus Is on His Throne—Even if Your Candidate Lost

When Americans head to work today, about half of them will be overjoyed that their political candidate for governor, senator or congressman won on Election Day. The other half will be disappointed, discouraged or outraged because their candidate

lost.

People on both sides of the political divide viewed the 2018 midterms as the mother of all elections. Shikha Dalmia of *Time* magazine, writing from the political left, declared: "This is the most important midterm election in our lifetime" because it is a referendum on Trump's presidency.

Former Vice President Joe Biden also declared the 2018 elections to be "the most important election any of us have voted in so far." And the far-left magazine *Mother Jones* called this week's election "the most important election of our lives."

And in an interview from the Cannes Film Festival in France, actress Jane Fonda said, "It's hard for me to breathe right now" because she was so nervous about the midterm elections. "The elections on Nov. 6 are the most important elections of my lifetime. So much depends on what happens," Fonda said.

Meanwhile, many leaders on the conservative side of politics also viewed the 2018 midterm election as an Armageddon-style, once-in-a-lifetime, D-Day event. During a White House dinner in August, President Trump warned top evangelical leaders that if Democrats win in November, they "will overturn everything that we've done, and they'll do it quickly and violently."

There are a few problems with this "most important election in history" scenario. For one, it has been used before. It was used in 2016. It was used in 2012. It was used in 1988, when the first George Bush ran against Michael Dukakis. The phrase was even used by *The New York Times* in 1864, when President Abraham Lincoln was running for a second term against General George B. McClellan!

We Americans have a flair for the dramatic when it comes to politics. We are the masters of hype. We wring our hands and hyperventilate when politicians or celebrities tell us a national disaster is imminent if we don't change who is

sitting in the White House.

And the saddest fact is that political parties spend a lot of money to manipulate our emotions with advertisements, robocalls and campaign mailings. Democrats and Republicans spent a combined \$5.2 billion on the 2018 elections—making it the most expensive election in history according to Business Insider. With all this money being spent on attack ads, no wonder we are all stressed out.

I'm not saying your vote isn't important. (I voted early this year.) I'm not suggesting elections don't have the power to improve our lives. I'm not saying you shouldn't care about politics.

But as I've listened to the overheated rhetoric of this campaign cycle, I've been reminded of one very comforting truth that helps me sleep at night—even when Republicans and Democrats alike tell us that the world will collapse if the wrong person gets elected.

That truth is simple: Jesus Christ is on the throne, no matter who gets elected.

I have been meditating on verses about God's throne during the 2018 midterms. It gives me great peace to know that God's authority transcends all human authority—even when wicked men are in power.

Psalms 45:6a says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever." Psalm 47:8 says, "God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne." Psalm 103:19 says, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom rules over all." Many of the psalms focus on the reality of God's throne in heaven.

Lamentations 5:19 says, "You, O Lord, remain forever; your throne endures from generation to generation." And Hebrews 8:1 says that Jesus Christ "is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens." Not only is God on the

throne, but He has also shared all His authority with His Son. And His throne is immovable. God's rule is ultimate and undeniable.

I discovered that the word "throne" appears 44 times in the book of Revelation, more times than in any other book of the Bible. That's significant, because Revelation reminds us not only who is working behind the curtain of human history, but how His authority will be revealed to all people when this world comes to an end.

No matter whom we elect, God is ultimately in charge. No matter how much we argue about moral values, poverty, social justice, global warming, race, sexuality, economics, taxation, health care or immigration policy, a day will come when all human opinions will yield to the authority of the one true God. All senators, governors, presidents, prime ministers and kings will bow to Him. All mouths will be shut.

Let's remember that the earliest Christians never had the freedom to vote, and many of them were thrown into Rome's coliseums to die. Yet they declared to their culture: "We have no king but Jesus."

We should never put our ultimate trust in a politician or a political party. In the end, the King of kings will have the last word.

Is It Trump's Fault That We Are a Nation of Haters?

Last Saturday at the Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh, a man armed with an assault rifle and three handguns

interrupted the worship service shouting, "All Jews must die!" He then killed 11 people, including a 97-year-old woman, Rose Mallinger. Her family fully expected her to live to be 100.

Before the first funeral of the Tree of Life victims had been performed, media pundits were blaming President Trump for the shooting—saying his caustic tone and hateful tweets have fueled today's climate of violence. They did the same the week before, when a 56-year-old former male stripper named Cesar Sayoc was arrested in Florida. He was accused of mailing a dozen crude pipe bombs to various critics of Trump.

So let's pose the question: Is our president guilty of throwing gasoline on this fire? Is he the reason there's so much hate in America these days?

I'll admit I often cringe when I see President Trump's insensitive tweets. But if I'm objective (and objectivity is something we lack these days in the media), I have to admit there is plenty of hate being thrown around on both sides of today's nasty political feud. Consider this summary of the past year and a half:

- Just hours after President Trump was sworn in as president, the singer Madonna told a crowd at the Women's March on Washington: "Yes I'm angry. Yes I'm enraged. Yes I have thought a lot about blowing up the White House." She then spewed so much profanity that CNN had to stop airing her speech. Something shifted that day. America's Era of Hate officially began.
- In June of last year, a crazed gunman from Illinois, James Hodgkinson, began shooting at Republican lawmakers on a baseball field in suburban Washington, D.C.—seriously wounding Congressman Steve Scalise of Louisiana. Investigators searched Hodgkinson's online history and found that he was militantly opposed to President Trump and Republicans in general.

- Meanwhile, President Trump kept up with his insensitive tweets and comments. He used choice words such as “clowns,” “dummy dope,” “lightweight” and “low class slob” to describe his political enemies. He called Republican Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky a “spoiled brat” and Meryl Streep “one of the most over-rated actresses.” Then he described California congresswoman Maxine Waters as “an extraordinarily low IQ person.”
- Maxine Waters fired back last June. In a speech to supporters, she urged them to attack and harass members of Trump’s administration. She was caught on video saying: “If you see anybody from that Cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, in a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd. And you push back on them.” Fellow Democrats chastised her for encouraging mob violence.
- More celebrities jumped into the fray. In June of this year actor Robert De Niro went as low as possible when he launched a profanity-laced tirade at the Tony Awards in New York. “It’s no longer, ‘Down with Trump,’” De Niro declared. “It’s [Expletive] Trump.’” The crowd cheered. The hate reached a boiling point.
- Earlier this month, Democrats were surprised when former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton told CNN that there is no longer room for civility in politics. “You cannot be civil with a political party that wants to destroy what you stand for,” Clinton said, noting that “civility can start again” when Democrats win the midterm elections.
- Even President Obama’s former attorney general, Eric Holder, shocked his colleagues by striking an uncivil tone. On Oct. 7 during an event in Georgia, he said he could no longer abide by the rules suggested by former First Lady Michelle Obama, who famously said of her

enemies: “When they go low, we go high.” Holder said: “No, no. When they go low, we kick ‘em. That’s what the new Democratic Party is about.”

There’s no question that President Trump has poured fuel on this fire. But there’s also no question that both Democrats and Republicans have taken hate to a new level in today’s political war. It’s no wonder that mentally unstable people are mailing bombs and shooting up synagogues. The hate is contagious. Our air is toxic from all the verbal venom that has been released into the atmosphere.

I’ve prayed about what my response should be in this Era of Hate. The Lord took me back to the scene when the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord’s glory in the temple. Isaiah said: “Woe is me, for I am undone because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the middle of a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5).

When Isaiah had his encounter with God, he didn’t point a finger and blame anyone else for the ugliness around him. He knew he was part of the problem. He was convicted about his own words. He took responsibility for his own attitudes.

Ask yourself: Are you pouring the fuel of hate on the fire that is raging in our country? Are you an agent of division, or a minister of reconciliation? Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?

I can’t stop President Trump from tweeting. I can’t stop mobs from forming. I can’t convince politicians, newscasters or late-night talk-show hosts from spewing their hateful sarcasm. But I can control my own tongue, and I can keep a lid on my own anger. And I can show a nation of haters that the love of Jesus is the higher way. I hope you will do the same.