

BEYOND TODAY

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Real hope for tough times

After the turmoil and tribulation of 2020, many wonder if the new year will bring brighter days.

What a difference a year makes! Twelve months ago, as the decade of the 2020s dawned, very few would have predicted the nature of the year to come. While Covid-19 has turned all our lives upside down, the economic uncertainty attached to the final Brexit arrangements remains ever present in the background, adding to our overall feelings of concern and malaise.

We hope for a speedy return to our old patterns of life with family, friends, entertainment, eating out and holidays. That is the hope we share, whoever we are – whether citizen, worker, politician, business owner or member of the clergy; whether we work from home, or in a lonely office with or without socially distanced colleagues wearing masks; or in the beleaguered hospitality sector in its many forms. Even those in school or other forms of education with assessments to come and qualifications to reach live in hope of a more settled future.

Beyond the legacy of 2020

The past year certainly grabbed our attention. However, what if suddenly, even miraculously, life did rapidly return to normal, with visits to family and summer holidays to look forward to? How would we feel? Would it be like waking from a bad dream, which we then promptly put out of our minds?

Life has been on hold. Work may have been furloughed or relocated to home, or may even have been replaced with unemployment. Some grieve for lost loved ones; others have endured severe illness.

Perhaps during it all we have taken time to reflect on



At times of lockdown and isolation even the safest home can begin to feel like a prison.

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some of life's other important, even vital, areas. Is there a higher power? Might there be some greater purpose to life? Could there really be something ahead in which we can put real hope and which would give us stability?

Viruses cannot be seen by the naked eye, but we know with certainty they exist and the effect they can have. Likewise, people of faith say they are certain that there is a higher power, that there is indeed a God. They express that opinion not simply in blind hope, but in the confidence which comes from their experience of, and their relationship with, their Creator.

In 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul writes that faith,

hope and charity (love) are the three greatest Christian virtues. Perhaps we might wonder why hope is listed here. In Romans 5, Paul shows the link between faith and hope. He wrote: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2).

We stand and rejoice in this hope, because of this faith in God and in Jesus Christ. This hope is in the glory of God. Paul goes on to say, “And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and charac-

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ter, hope” (verses 3-4). He speaks of difficult times, trials, challenges, sickness, and loss in the knowledge that these can produce endurance and perseverance, which in turn produce character which produces hope.

If we reverse this line of reasoning we see that hope comes from character, character comes from perseverance, and perseverance from tribulations. Stated this way, we understand that hope is only relevant because we experience challenges and difficulties. It is the trials in life,

especially those we go through as Christians, that produce this hope, and this hope is in God.

Ultimate fulfilment for eternity

So how does this work? Paul continues, “Now, hope does not disappoint...” (verse 5). Hope often accompanies or follows disappointment. Again, Paul continues, “. . . because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who [which] was given to us.”

In the same way that we must ask God for faith and love, we must boldly ask for hope. This hope does not disappoint, because we don’t manufacture it for ourselves. Hope comes from God; He gives it to us.

Faith, hope, and love are all intertwined, and faith and love are bound together by the hope that comes from God.

We all have our hopes for 2021: for ourselves, our loved ones, friends, neighbours, workmates, colleagues, even complete strangers similarly affected by what have been the uncommon trials. We hope for a return to a semblance of normality and for a marked improvement over all we have experienced in recent months.

In expressing this hope let us not neglect the real source – and the ultimate fulfilment – of all our hopes, which is God Himself, who inspired one of the memorable messages of the Christian religion: “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

David Fenney

Lost in search of a dream

God has a plan for everyone. He promises hope even for those who have died.

Each year large numbers of migrants make dangerous sea crossings in small, often-overcrowded, boats in the hope of obtaining a better life. Many drown in the process. Others risk suffocation in lorries not designed to transport passengers in a bid to cross the Channel from France to the UK. Fleeing war, oppression or poverty, in many cases survivors discover that their new life falls short of what they had dreamed it would be like.

Scripture promises a time when dreams of a better life will be fulfilled. However, it will not come under any human government. Only God’s way of life can bring peace. God declares: “Their feet run to evil, and they make haste

to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths.

The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; they have made themselves crooked paths; whoever takes that way shall not know peace” (Isaiah 59:7-8).

Peace will reign and dreams be fulfilled, first for the living, and later for those who have died without knowledge of God’s great purpose for mankind.

To learn more please request or download our Bible study aids *What Happens After Death?*, *Why Were You Born?* and *Christ’s Reign on Earth: What It Will Be Like*.

A pandemic of loneliness

The lockdowns of 2020 ended normal social interaction for many. However isolation resulted in a new pandemic, this time one of loneliness. Biblical principles can help resolve this.

At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic one of the first decrees of the United Kingdom government was a complete lockdown for almost everyone who was not employed in what was classified as “an essential job.”

Suddenly normal social interaction ground to a halt; we could no longer meet up with our friends. We couldn't even meet immediate family if they belonged to a different household. Grandparents could no longer interact with their grandchildren. Friends and neighbours could no longer visit each other. For many it became a time of isolation and, with that, loneliness, which can be immensely difficult to bear.

Scripture reveals God is aware of this phenomenon.

A biblical example of loneliness

In a significant period of his life during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the prophet Elijah had confronted hundreds of the prophets of the false god Baal. In response to his prayer, God had brought fire down from heaven. Following this miracle the prophets of Baal were destroyed (1 Kings 18:17-40).

Queen Jezebel was furious and threatened to arrange for Elijah's death. From what had been a high point in his life, the prophet's elation turned almost immediately to depression, and he ran for his life.

He experienced circumstances where he felt completely isolated and alone to the extent he wanted to die (1 Kings 19:4). However, God was still with him and directed him to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the Almighty asked him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah explained: “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life” (verses 9-10).

Elijah unloaded his feelings. He felt totally alone in the world, believing he was the only one representing God. The following verses show that God was listening. He relieved the pressure on Elijah by giving him tasks to fulfil, and brought in a successor named Elisha to take over from him. God also added a very significant comment, “Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth

that has not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18). Elijah knew nothing of these people; he thought he was on his own.

How about us? Sometimes, even without a lockdown, we can feel isolated. The pandemic made it seem ten times worse. Isolation and loneliness are challenges, but there are biblical principles that can help.

Ways to alleviate loneliness

As in the aforementioned example of Elijah, having a useful task can increase feelings of worth. Checking on neighbours, collecting groceries or prescriptions for them, or asking if they need help with anything else, within the regulations, is social interaction for them and for us. A simple cheery, socially-distanced greeting may help alleviate their undesired solitude and maybe ours too. Even while a face covering hides the mouth, a sincere smile is reflected by the eyes. God wants us to live our lives in harmony with those around us. Doing so will help cultivate friendships and help dispel loneliness.

To maintain friendships we need to be approachable. The book of Proverbs gives the principle: “A man who has friends must himself be friendly” (Proverbs 18:24). Those who are regularly rude to others, overbearing, inconsiderate, pushy, or try to make others look small, are likely to find that they have few friends.

Isolation and loneliness are challenges, but there are biblical principles that can help.

Showing love to a neighbour is to follow what has become known as The Golden Rule: “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12). This principle at its basic level often generates a reciprocal response. You do someone a good turn; they usually are going to do it back, if not to you, maybe to someone else down the line. That's fine – the system works in principle.

While returning good for good is right and proper, it's really only doing what everyone else is doing (Matthew 5:44-47). Jesus Christ and God the Father want us to love our neighbour even if their reaction is not so loving in

return, or even downright hostile. It is our attitude of mind that governs how we react, and how we live.

Keep in touch

During this pandemic we may not be physically with many, or any, of our friends and relatives. Modern technology can help ease this isolation. We can communicate really at almost any time. Being locked down can supply more reasons to communicate with others, because while we may be physically separated, with the many means of modern communication available to us, the restrictions actually give us a greater incentive to get in touch with others by phone, internet or even by letter.

Friendships can be maintained regardless of distance. We can keep in touch with others even if they are in a completely different part of the world. It's possible to both talk to and to see loved ones through the internet instantly, and at little or no cost. Having established that communication, it's something we can continue as society eases out of lockdown.

Elijah couldn't do this – in fact he didn't even realise there were other believers around with whom he could

communicate until God revealed it to him.

Be close to God

Jesus Christ explained how close He wants to be to us: “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you” (John 15:12-15).

Christ called His obedient disciples His “friends”, talking both to His disciples of that time, and on down through the centuries. We too can be friends of God.

Elijah, in his darkest moments, thought he had no physical companionship. But even then he knew God had not deserted him. This is the greatest friendship we can have; the friendship and fellowship of Jesus Christ and God the Father. To be called not a servant, but a friend of God – in this, we are never alone.

Brian Crook

Our Creator knows best

A year on from the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, what the Creator God commanded in scripture stands as a stark reminder that this suffering was avoidable.

It takes a strong stomach to watch a video of the Wuhan wet market in China. It is deemed to be the possible spawning ground of the novel coronavirus that has wreaked so much havoc. There is a distinct possibility that the disease spread from bats via another species, perhaps pangolins (small anteaters), both of which the market sells.

Bats are a species specifically mentioned in Scripture as a creature that God says should not be eaten (Leviticus 11:19). However, it is not just the Chinese who eat flesh which God declares “unclean.” Animals described as fit for food should chew the cud (ruminants) and have cloven hooves (Leviticus 11:2-8). Pigs do not chew the cud, yet their flesh is eaten in many forms, resulting in health problems from tapeworms to trichinosis. They also carry viruses from which variant strains of influenza can develop such as the one that caused the H1N1 (swine flu) pandemic in 2009-2010.

Pigs aren't the only unclean food people enjoy eating. Shellfish also do not fit the biblical criteria for healthy sustenance, having neither fins nor scales (Leviticus 11:9-12). Illnesses associated with shellfish consumption include

gastrointestinal infections, salmonella, E coli and hepatitis. Shellfish are bottom feeders which ingest parasites, waste and the dead bodies of other sea creatures. In 2014, researchers at Stanford University in California found that they also absorb pathogens and chemicals such as “herbicides, pharmaceuticals and flame retardants” (www.seeker.com/mussels-and-clams-can-clean-up-polluted-water-1768972732.html). Dangerous heavy metals, such as mercury, can also be found inside them.

Sadly, human beings think they know better than their Creator. This applies not just to dietary issues but to virtually every area of personal conduct. Humanity reaps the bitter fruit of rejecting their Creator's instructions in so many areas of life (Galatians 6:7). Eventually, this rejection will bring it to the brink of total annihilation (Matthew 24:22). Only Jesus Christ's return will put an end to the misery humanity brings upon itself.

To study God's dietary instructions further please request or download our booklet *What Does the Bible Teach About Clean and Unclean Meats?*

Philip Perry

How to retain our first love

Christ praised the Church at Ephesus for a number of admirable attributes but levelled this against them, that they had left their first love. What can we do to avoid the same pitfall?

Losing something implies that one first possessed it. For many, discovering the true gospel dispels much of the fear and dread brought about by our physical existence. Jesus Christ redeemed us from the death penalty our sins incurred, at the price of His life's blood. That knowledge should bring us great joy. Our reciprocal love should be such that we zealously desire to be like Christ and take on His attributes.

In the early chapters of the book of Revelation, Jesus Christ addressed seven congregations of His Church. Located along a mail route in what is present-day Turkey, they displayed various positive and negative features. These churches may represent eras of the Church down through time, traits within any given congregation, or characteristics each individual member might have at different stages in their lives – or all three.

The first of these churches was at Ephesus. They had many good points. Jesus declared: “I know your works, your labour, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have

Maintaining zeal for God and His ways requires effort, otherwise it just tends to fade away.

laboured for My name's sake and have not become weary” (Revelation 2:2-3). However Jesus also had something against them and explained, “you have left your first love” and instructed them to repent of this (verse 4-5).

Who or what should be our first love?

Our love for God the Father and Jesus Christ should exceed the love we have for anything else. Jesus was asked: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matthew 22:36-38).

Maintaining that zeal for God and His ways requires effort, otherwise it just tends to fade away, swallowed up in day-to-day life. Satan's desire is to keep as many from eternal life as he can. Thus, he actively tries to distract us

from focussing on God in the hope that he can set us on a path that will divert us from God's ways permanently.

Zeal can soon be replaced with lethargy or neglect should we start to let down and allow ourselves to become distracted.

As we approach Christ's return, Satan, knowing his time is short, will attack God's people with great ferocity. Already, much evil abounds in the world. We must ensure we commit fully to God's way of life, in order not to lose our first love.

Proof and praise

To dispel Satan's deceptions, there must be no doubt in our minds that God is the supreme power in the universe. If we are not convinced that God created us for a purpose and with a plan for all mankind, then it is imperative we prove it while we still have time. Without total belief in God and His plan for us, we will fall short as the Ephesians did. Our booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom* can help clarify and encourage.

So many who profess a belief in God fail to build a relationship with Him. *We can have an abundance of scriptural knowledge but we must live by it.* A close relationship with our Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ will ensure we do not become separated from Them.

Giving thanks and praise to God throughout each day will draw us closer towards Him. Singing psalms can help here (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). A deepening faith and sincere repentance will also bring us closer to God. Repentance is essential!

Be easily shepherded

The prophet Isaiah records the characteristics of those God regards: “On this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2). We must want to do God's will. Our focus must be on humbling ourselves before God and obeying Him. Strong-willed, defiant attitudes will render us virtually impossible to teach and we will risk missing out on God's Kingdom.

Enduring throughout life in humility, giving all praise and glory to God, growing in an attitude of loving obedience and commitment should ensure that God, both Father and Son, always remain as our first love.

David Riddell

Perils of lawlessness

End-time prophecies speak of a time when human beings will become ever more lawless. No longer will they respect the governments and rulers God has permitted. How can we avoid becoming a part of this evil of lawlessness?

In His prophecy on the Mount of Olives, Jesus warned that before His return lawlessness would abound, and “the love of many will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12).

Earlier in His ministry, He had explained that “not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who *practise lawlessness!*’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

God wants all people to obey His instructions as expounded in the Ten Commandments. The first four show us how to love God and the last six how to love our fellow human beings. Christ summarised them as: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

However we are also required to obey the human rulers God has placed over us.

Scripture instructs us to obey human rulers

Just as God has ministers for spiritual matters, He has also placed rulers in the world to handle physical issues. Christians are not to actively engage in the physical governments, systems of justice and (human) law enforcement. Ultimately, God has authorised such systems (John 19:10-11). In effect, He says to Christians, “I’ll take care of those matters in My way and to the degree I decide; you attend to spiritual matters.”

The judges and kings of the Old Testament were similarly allowed by God but, like lawmakers today, they did not always base their rulership on His laws (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). Despite this, Jesus instructed, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Luke 20:25).

The apostle Paul elaborated on this thought on several occasions. He told his trainee Timothy, “I tell you to pray for all people, asking God for what they need and being thankful to Him. Pray for rulers and for all who have au-

thority so that we can have quiet and peaceful lives full of worship and respect for God. This is good, and it pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to know the truth” (1 Timothy 2:1-4, New Century Version).

He wrote in similar terms to the Christians at Rome, (Romans 13:1-3). This was at a time when Rome ruled and was not known for its tolerance of anything perceived to be a threat to its empire.

Both the apostle Peter and Christ’s half-brother Jude pronounced stark warnings against rejection of authority

There are stark warnings against rejection of authority and speaking evil of dignitaries, no matter how much we may disagree with them or their policies.

and speaking evil of dignitaries, no matter how much we might disagree with them or their policies (2 Peter 2:10; Jude 1:8).

A time to make a stand

At times we may face a conflict between man’s laws and the laws of Almighty God. When that happens, we must obey the laws of God (Acts 5:29). However, we must be certain that it is indeed the laws of God that apply and that we are not seeking to justify doing our own will. We may disagree with certain regulations but that does not necessarily exempt us from obeying them, unless they directly break God’s laws. We need to choose our battles prayerfully, otherwise we could find ourselves tempting or disobeying God, while claiming to be doing His will (as those previously mentioned in Matthew 7:21-23). This was something Satan tried to persuade Christ to do (Matthew 4:5-7).

Tests of our responses to authority are part of our preparation for God’s coming Kingdom, when we shall become “kings and priests” with Jesus Christ, teaching God’s holy, righteous ways to all. Lawlessness will be no more.

Mark Webb



Q Why do religious people die like everybody else?
Subscriber in Hull

A The book of Hebrews, chapter 9:27, states that “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgement,” so there is more to life than our mere physical existence. There is a life beyond death, as reflected by Christ Himself when He stated, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

Once a person repents of having lived a sinful life, and is baptised, acknowledging that he or she was responsible for Christ’s death, that person is promised everlasting life. However, more than lip service is required. It is necessary to live according to biblical standards rather than by human traditions. Everlasting life is a gift from God that can never be earned (Romans 5:15-18). Nonetheless, we are commanded to base our way of life on God’s precepts, embracing the character attributes of Jesus, the Son of God. That is an obligation placed on us.

Let the Bible Answer...

What does God desire of His human creation?

God’s desires that all would repent and turn to Him: 2 Chronicles 7:14; Ezekiel 33:11; Matthew 7:21-23; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; 2 Peter 3:8-9.

God desires that we walk with Him: Micah 6:8; Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 10:4-5; Ephesians 6:5-6.

God wants to live with us as a family: Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 6:16-18; 1 John 3:1-2; Revelation 21:3-7.

The prophet Daniel was made aware of the first resurrection from the dead, which is expanded upon in the New Testament (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 15:16-58). He wrote: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life . . . Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:2-3).

Elsewhere in the Bible, death is referred to as “sleep,” without consciousness of any passing events (see 1 Thessalonians 4:14 and 1 Corinthians 11:30). King Solomon stated clearly that “the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

The resurrections and what happens to the living and the dead, the righteous and the wicked, are further explained in our booklets *What Happens After Death* and *Why Were You Born?*

For those called by God in this age, this present life is a preparation for eternity in God’s family, assuming that we take on His character, as reflected by Jesus. That is why we go through trials and tribulations, including facing death, to develop in us faith and trust in the promises of our Creator God.

Q What was God doing before He created human beings?
Subscriber in Rotherham

A The short answer is that no one really knows. The Greek New Testament refers to eternity as ‘the ages of the ages’ – and perhaps that is where our understanding comes to a halt, since it is difficult for us to comprehend eternity.

The key message that Christ brought to the attention of His disciples was the promise of life everlasting, as in Matthew 25:46: “and these will go . . . into everlasting life.” Although all human beings have had a beginning, which is also true of angelic creatures, eternal life is something that only God Almighty has, i.e., the Father and the Son (John 1:18).

The eternity of God is highlighted in the Old Testament as well, as in Isaiah 57:15 which refers to God as “He who inhabits eternity.” So we see that with God, life is inherent and ever existing. “From everlasting to everlasting” is how Psalm 90:2 refers to God. We are informed that “the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things that are revealed belong to us and our children forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29). There we have it. Not all knowledge about God has been given to us at the moment, but there can be no doubt that the fundamentals about God and our purpose for existing are revealed.



Letters From Our Readers

Magazine, booklets provide insight and encouragement

Thank you so much for the *Beyond Today* magazine and the booklet on *Living Faith*. Your words are the words of God and are very encouraging to me.

Reader in Buxton

Thank you again for your magazine, always read with gratitude for your insight.

Reader in Cheshire

I am new to *Beyond Today* but already see the Bible in a way I never noticed before. It's a refreshing eye-opener and the light bulb is going on. Hope to get more enlightenment from studying further.

Reader in Dublin

Thank you for continuing to provide such an uplifting and informative publication, especially during these difficult times.

Reader in Walsall

Sabbaths and Holy Days

I find it very difficult to follow God's festivals and Holy Days as written in the Bible, when there are no fellow believers near. I strive to follow Jesus faithfully. It is your magazine, booklets and *Beyond Today* TV programmes on You Tube that make it easier for me to stay true to the truth of Jesus. Thank you for the strength and the courage to be the person God made me to be.

Reader in Plymouth

Editor's comment: In addition to the TV programmes there is a series

of Beyond Today Bible studies on the Holy Days which you may find helpful (www.ucg.org/beyond-today/beyond-today-bible-study/let-us-keep-the-feasts).

Creation or Evolution

Thank you for all the booklets you have sent me. My son-in-law believes in evolution and we have some interesting conversations. Perhaps this booklet will change his outlook.

Reader in Sutton Coldfield

Easy to understand . . .

I love receiving your magazine. I find it helpful and inspiring as well as explaining the scriptures in easy English.

Reader in Leicestershire

. . . or not so easy?

I would suggest a very simple "Ten Commandments" for children and very ordinary people with just basic levels of understanding is a much needed resource. It should be in larger print and succinctly and simply written to aid the comprehension of those with very basic learning skills.

Name and address supplied

Editor's comment: Trying to pitch our booklets at a level for everyone to understand is no easy task. We have a selection of Family Study Guides (www.ucg.org/members/family-study-guides) and Teen Bible Studies (www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/teen-bible-study-guides) on our website. These are written in simpler English and contain less dense text.

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