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REAL TRUTH

A MAGAZINE RESTORING PLAIN UNDERSTANDING



BIG
EVENTS
OF 2024



'Should I Be Worried About AI?'

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Front Cover: The Bailey's beads effect shows as the moon passes in front of the sun during a total solar eclipse across North America, as seen from Bloomington, Indiana (April 8, 2024).

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PERSONAL FROM

David C. Fack



Is Government Reform Really Possible?

THE GERMAN government has collapsed. The government of France has collapsed. Britain's government is on the verge of collapse. So is Canada's.

Syria just collapsed, with rebel forces ousting long-time strongman President Bashar Assad. I watched footage of a rebel who took Damascus declare in no uncertain terms: Jerusalem is next. While they will meet intense resistance, such is the state of the Mideast. The world desperately needs solutions—and fast!

War in Europe is intensifying. After the United States authorized Ukraine's use of U.S.-made ATACMS missiles, Russia's immediate response was to publicly update its nuclear doctrine, allowing for a nuclear response to conventional (non-nuclear) attack if determined necessary.

The threat of response soon moved beyond the theoretical. Kyiv very quickly used its new authorization to fire on Russia, prompting intensified talk of World War III. Only a day after the first volley of these sophisticated missiles struck Russian soil, the U.S. evacuated its embassy in Kyiv on reports of an imminent Russian response. No end of articles now speak either of how World War III could soon begin or that it already *has* begun!

In December, the Secretary General of NATO warned, "Danger is moving towards us at full speed. We must not look the other way. We must face it." He also stated, "I'll be honest: the security situation does not look good. It's undoubtedly the worst in my lifetime. And I suspect in yours too."

It is now obvious we are closer to nuclear conflict than ever before—with a best-case scenario being a World War fought using highly sophisticated and destructive conventional weapons. Of course chemical weapons are always loitering "off stage."

The American president-elect is working in the background on a solution, but little, if any, real progress has been reported. It was on the basis of bringing peace, security and financial stability that he was elected. There was even hope he could end the conflict before taking office, which, with ongoing developments, has become increasingly unlikely.

The only thing everyone seems to agree on is that America—and the world—are in desperate need of change!

The incoming president is promising government reform on an unprecedented scale. He has commissioned a new Department of Government Efficiency led by the richest man on Earth to "dismantle Government Bureaucracy, slash excess regula-

tions, cut wasteful expenditures, and restructure Federal agencies.”

So dramatic is the planned overhaul that the president-elect called it “the ‘Manhattan project’ of our time”—meaning change would be as consequential as the development of nuclear weapons.

This department is tasked with ending its charge by July 4, 2026, the 250th anniversary of the nation. Even the president’s political detractors recognize the need for change—and want it! The waste and fraud in public and private sectors are so far-reaching, however, that ferocious resistance is inevitable. The red tape built into existing law will present great challenges. But assume for a moment America *could* be restored to great prosperity, or even ascend to unparalleled prosperity, with success positively impacting the rest of the world.

The question is: Would it be enough? Take a moment to read what God explained to ancient Israel about a grave danger.

Speaking of the promised land with great material blessing, Moses explained in Deuteronomy 8:7-9: “...the LORD your God brings you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey; a land wherein you shall eat bread without scarceness, you shall not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you may dig brass.” This is a description of great *prosperity*! America is already the most blessed nation on Earth—perhaps most closely resembling what is described above.

Moses then went on to tell the Israelites this should result in *gratitude*, but also issued a warning: “When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. Beware that you forget not the LORD your God, in not keeping His commandments, and His judgments, and His statutes, which I command you this day: lest *when* you have eaten and are full, and

have built goodly houses, and dwelt *therein*; and *when* your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God...and you say in your heart, My power and the might of *mine* hand has gotten me this wealth. But you shall remember the LORD your God: for *it is* He that gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore unto your fathers, as *it is this day*” (vs. 10-18).

America has *already* forgotten God! This would not change with increased economic prosperity. In fact, the record of history is that the *opposite* occurs! The story of America has become a long litany of every kind of abominable belief and practice known to man.

More than anything **THIS** is what must change. Technological advancement, fiscal responsibility and safety are all hallmarks of a great civilization, but Christ explained the foundation on which society must rest for true success: “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).

The utopia that all people long for cannot come without the Kingdom of God. Isaiah 11 describes a time when the poor will be judged “with righteousness” and the wicked who are unwilling to change will be destroyed. Even accidents will not occur. But here is a description of no more wild animal attacks: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’ den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain...” (vs. 6-9).

The reason this is possible is explained in the latter half of verse 9: “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters

cover the sea.” In one sense, Jesus Christ was the ultimate revolutionary. He announced this Kingdom wherever He went. Government reform on a supernatural scale—in every nation on Earth—was His constant focus. This is why His disciples asked Him before He left Earth, “Will You at this time restore again the Kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). They knew **DRAMATIC CHANGE** was coming and hoped it would be in their lifetimes. Now, nearly 2,000 years later, it will come in *our* lifetimes!

True Christians each day pray, “Your Kingdom come.” They want God’s “will [to] be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10), and look forward to helping bring about that change as leaders in this Kingdom. A new video series about this Kingdom has been posted on our website, with two parts already available. Watch them for truly life-changing understanding!

Sincere human effort can only go so far in bringing about much-needed change. Very soon—well *before* America’s 250th anniversary—the nation **WILL** be far greater than the best minds can fathom or the most impoverished can long for, but not through human effort. In fact, the entire world will see great peace and prosperity!

If you want to be among those to affect real change in this coming worldwide Government, request my free book *Where Is the True Church? – and Its Incredible History!* The world will soon be “delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21)—those He has trained in His true Church down through the millennia.

A broken world plagued by thousands of years of bad “management” will be fixed! Mankind will not just obey all of God’s laws, they will look to Him for solutions to every problem. You now understand how *true* reform will come to a world that needs it even more desperately than it understands! Thank you to all who support this Work, or who will choose to do so, ensuring this message can “freely” reach the world (Matt. 10:8). □



BIG EVENTS OF 2024

As we step into a new year, reflecting on the past 12 months through the lens of God's Word offers hope for what lies ahead.

BY EDWARD L. WINKFIELD, MANAGING EDITOR

THE ECLIPSE on April 8, 2024, was unforgettable. Early in the day, a hazy sky threatened to obscure the first total eclipse in Ohio in over 200 years—the last one dating back to 1806. Only 21 total solar eclipses have crossed the lower 48 states in U.S. history, and I did not want to miss seeing this moment.

As the full eclipse approached, the skies cleared. Co-workers from across The Restored Church of God's World Headquarters campus gathered outside wearing eclipse glasses, one hoping to capture the moment in stunning detail with a high-powered camera lens.

The totality was breathtaking. The sun disappeared, an eerie darkness fell, and the stillness

was surreal. As the famous diamond ring effect sparkled, one of my colleagues explained the phenomenon of Baily's beads.

Standing there, I felt small—humbled by the work of an awesome God who created such wonders. The eclipse felt supernatural, a brief pause from the ordinary.

Looking back, it serves as a fitting metaphor for 2024 itself—mostly darkness, with rare moments of light.

The year saw its share of shadow: high-profile assassination attempts in the United States, over 60 political killings in Mexico, and intensifying wars in the Middle East, Europe and Africa. Natural disasters—hurricanes close to home and

devastating floods abroad—added to the turmoil.

Meanwhile, millions fled violence and oppression, straining resources in nations already struggling with post-pandemic inflation and economic disruptions.

These dark events reminded us of our purpose at *The Real Truth*. Throughout 2024, we aimed to help readers focus on God and His Plan during uncertain times. Our work has been to provide a steady reminder of the Being who remains in control, carrying out a purpose far greater than we can fully comprehend.

Global Tensions

In 2024, nearly half of the world's population—over 70 countries—participated in national elections. Expectations for a volatile year were met, and at times, reality exceeded imagination.

In the United States, presidential campaign season began as anticipated: hyperpartisan divides, relentless mudslinging and an onslaught of political ads. Then things turned shocking.

During the campaign, Republican candidate Donald Trump's path to victory was nearly derailed by two assassination attempts. The first occurred at a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, where Mr. Trump sustained minor injuries from one of eight bullets fired, while a spectator was tragically killed. The act sobered citizens on both sides of the aisle. Two months later, another attempt followed in Florida, with the would-be assassin leaving a summary of his motives in a letter: "This was an assassination attempt on Donald Trump but I failed you. I tried my best and gave it all the gumption I could muster."

After U.S. President Joe Biden's first and only debate against Mr. Trump, Mr. Biden shocked the nation by dropping out of the race. Vice President Kamala Harris was thrust into the spotlight as the Democratic nominee without having gone through a primary. She campaigned for the nation's highest office but fell short in November. Analysts blamed her late entry and lingering

doubts about her qualifications. Mr. Trump won the presidency.

The year's political turmoil and raw bitterness underscored why *The Real Truth* examines politics through a biblical lens. Articles such as "The 2024 Presidential Election: A Bible-based Survival Guide" and "What God Thinks of Politics" helped readers prepare for what was to come.

Globally, elections brought similar instability. Despite widespread participation in the democratic process, the results often seemed inconsequential in the bigger picture. Daniel 2:21 reminds us that it is God who "removes kings, and sets up kings." In the New Testament, Romans 13:1 says, "For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God."

Leadership transitions—no matter how turbulent—ultimately rest in God's hands.

Across Europe, political and economic crises boiled over. The governments of France and Germany collapsed, leaving the European Union scrambling.

Meanwhile, conflicts raged without pause. The Israel-Hamas war and the Russia-Ukraine war continued through the year, straining global resources. Unprecedented direct conflict between Israel and Iran stunned news watchers. Our article "America & Israel: What Can Break Their Bond?" looked at the relationship between the U.S. and Israel amid the raging conflicts. We also examined the ancient roots of today's global players in our article "Biblical Identities of Modern Nations."

Elsewhere, Russia's deepening alliance with North Korea—covered in our article "Russia and North Korea's Partnership"—provided Moscow with much-needed support, including North Korean troops for its military campaign in Ukraine.

Longstanding tensions continued to simmer in Asia. China and Taiwan remained at odds, while North Korea's provocations escalated. South Korea faced its own turmoil in December when President Yoon

Suk Yeol declared martial law, citing threats from North Korea and internal "anti-state forces." Public outrage was swift, leading the National Assembly to impeach the president. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo stepped in as acting president.

The war in Sudan, which began in April 2023, continued into 2024. Fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces led to 60,000 deaths in just one region within the first 14 months of the fighting, as reported by *Al Jazeera*. Many observers consider Sudan a failed state.

Violence, death and disease continued to run rampant in Haiti, with gangs terrorizing the citizens of the Caribbean nation. Just in March, over 50,000 fled Haiti's capital. By fall, nearly half the country's population of more than 11 million people were experiencing crisis levels of hunger or worse. We looked at Haiti's struggles in our article "Haiti's Gang War."

One of 2024's most stunning developments came late in the year, when Syria's government under President Bashar Assad fell. Following a rapid offensive by opposition forces, Mr. Assad fled to Russia, ending over 50 years of Assad family rule.

Amid these events, discussions of World War III felt more real than ever. June marked the 80th anniversary of D-Day, the pivotal moment in WWII when Allied Forces stormed the beaches of Normandy in France. Commemorations reminded us of the sacrifices of the past while highlighting today's fragile peace. In "D-Day: 80 Years Later," Editor-in-Chief David C. Pack explained how the world will ultimately find peace—it will not come from the efforts of men.

These developments painted a sobering picture: a world grappling with instability, war and political upheaval, desperately searching for security.

More Challenges

The year was the hottest on record where average global temperatures sur-

passed the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold set by the Paris Climate Agreement. Differing views on the causes of global temperature changes aside, this year's catastrophic weather events impacted millions.

A heat wave in Yemen—where temperatures can hit 122 degrees—was followed by intense flooding in the same region. Both natural events worsened an already precarious humanitarian crisis for those living in refugee camps and other areas of the nation.

In the United States, two devastating hurricanes—Helene and Milton—left trails of destruction. Hurricane Helene made landfall in the southern U.S. on September 26 as a Category 4 storm, triggering catastrophic flooding and claiming over 150 lives, primarily in North and South Carolina. According to *BBC News*, it was the deadliest hurricane to hit the U.S. mainland since 2005's Katrina.

Just weeks later, in early October, Hurricane Milton also struck Florida. Rapidly intensifying into a Category 5 cyclone, Milton, according to sources, was the strongest tropical storm worldwide for the year. These storms contributed to an exceptionally destructive Atlantic hurricane season, which caused more than \$500 billion in damages.

In late October, Spain faced its deadliest natural disaster in decades. Torrential rains unleashed catastrophic flash floods, killing more than 220 people, according to *Reuters*. Record rainfall overwhelmed infrastructure, swept away vehicles, and devastated homes. Damages soared into the billions of euros, reigniting debates about climate change and preparedness in Europe.

The year also saw other shocking disasters. On March 26, the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore collapsed after a container ship struck a support pier. Despite a timely warning call that halted traffic, six maintenance workers were killed. Shipping at the Port of Baltimore, a critical economic hub, ground to a halt for 11 weeks,

costing an estimated \$15 million per day in state revenue, *Governing* magazine reported. Full reconstruction is projected for fall 2028 at a cost nearing \$2 billion.

Amid this devastation, the United States saw a glimmer of hope in its long battle against the fentanyl crisis.

The Drug Enforcement Administration reported: "According to the CDC, the U.S. saw a 14.5% decrease in overdose deaths from June 2023 through June 2024. Also, for first time since 2021, DEA has seen a decrease in the potency of fentanyl pills. The latest DEA laboratory testing indicates 5 out of 10 pills tested in 2024 contain a potentially deadly dose of fentanyl. This is down from 7 out of ten pills in 2023 and 6 out of ten pills in 2022."

Yet experts warn the crisis is far from over. We analyzed America's more than 50-year battle with drugs in our article "Fentanyl: Can the War on Drugs Be Won?"

On the global health front, mpox upsurged in Africa, prompting a World Health Organization emergency declaration. A new viral sub-clade spread beyond the continent, posing fresh challenges.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 remained a lingering threat worldwide, with emerging variants keeping the disease a public health priority. Both crises reinforced the interconnected nature of global health and the need for vigilant, coordinated responses.

The 2024 Paris Olympics, held from July 26 to August 11, showcased both triumphs and controversies. The opening ceremony broke tradition, taking place along the Seine River, where athletes paraded in boats—a spectacle blending sport with Paris's cultural heritage.

Despite the symbolic Olympic Truce, the games were overshadowed by ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. Athletes from around the globe competed admirably, with the United States and China tying for the lead in gold medals, each securing 40.

However, the Olympics drew sharp criticism for a controversial performance in the opening ceremony. A segment some interpreted as mocking Christianity—reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*—sparked outrage and calls for boycotts. Critics accused organizers of perpetuating misogyny and cultural insensitivity, igniting debates about artistic freedom and respect for global values. As we examined in "Why the Olympics Can't Unite the World," the games fell short of their lofty promise to bring unity.

Searching for Answers

As global uncertainty deepens, people worldwide are searching for answers. Many have turned to astrology for guidance in relationships, careers and life decisions—particularly Millennials, as we explored in "Astrology: Should You Trust the Stars?"

Others, rightfully, have looked to the Bible for guidance, although God's Word—especially regarding prophecy—can be difficult to navigate. In "Are We Headed Toward Apocalypse?" we examined prophetic warnings like the Four Horsemen of Revelation—not to instill fear but to reveal God's ultimate plan for peace. Similarly, "What Is the Mark of the Beast?" explained that faithfulness to God requires discernment now, as society's systems increasingly oppose God's Commandments.

Ultimately, while the world offers distractions and incomplete answers, God alone holds the truth. By studying His Word, praying with sincerity and heeding prophetic warnings, we can find peace, direction and understanding. We addressed society's need for God's guidance in "Does the World Need God?"

Jesus' words in Luke 21:36 remain essential advice: "Watch you therefore, and pray always."

During the year ahead, we at *The Real Truth* will remain committed to guiding readers through biblical truth and God's perspective. □

Page 3, the Baily's beads effect shows as the moon passes in front of the sun during a total solar eclipse across North America, as seen from Bloomington, Indiana (April 8, 2024). Top, Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump is surrounded by U.S. Secret Service agents following an assassination attempt at a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania (July 13, 2024).

PAGE 3, JOSH EDELSON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; TOP, EVAN VUCCI/AP



Bottom, U.S. President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden talk to the camera crew after Mr. Biden addressed the nation about his decision to not seek reelection, in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington (July 24, 2024).

BOTTOM, EVAN VUCCI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Top, a Yemeni child uses a donkey to transport water from a well near a makeshift camp for internally displaced Yemenis in the northern Hajjah province, amid a severe heatwave and acute water shortage (May 23, 2024). Bottom, citizens in Syria take down statues of Hafez Assad, the father of ousted President Bashar Assad, in Damascus, Syria (Dec. 9, 2024).

TOP, ESSA AHMED/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM, MURAT SENGUL/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES





Top, the first vaccines for mpox are administered to hospital staff, with the program due to target the general population in the east of the country, where the current outbreak started a year ago (Oct. 7, 2024). Bottom, a Peruvian migrant father and his 1-year-old daughter wait for their group of migrants in preparation to cross over into the U.S., in El Paso, Texas (March 26, 2024).

TOP, AUBIN MUKONI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES;
BOTTOM, BRANDON BELL/GETTY IMAGES





Top, a man walks through a debris-covered street after flash floods hit the Sedaví area of Valencia, Spain (Oct. 30, 2024). Bottom, protesters call for the ouster of South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol outside the National Assembly in Seoul, ahead of a second martial law impeachment vote (Dec. 14, 2024).

TOP, DAVID RAMOS/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM, JUNG YEON-JE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Mortar platoon soldiers perform a combat mission as Ukrainian soldiers hold their positions in the snow-covered Serebryan Forest in Kreminna, Ukraine, as the Russia-Ukraine war continues (Jan. 10, 2024).

KOSTIANTYN LIBEROV/LIBKOS/GETTY IMAGES





Top, Sudanese families who fled the war in Sudan carry their belongings while arriving at a transit center for refugees in Renk, South Sudan (Feb. 14, 2024). Sudan has been ravaged by internal fighting between the Sudanese Army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. Bottom, a man inspects damages to his house after Hurricane Helene made landfall in Horseshoe Beach, Florida (Sept. 28, 2024).

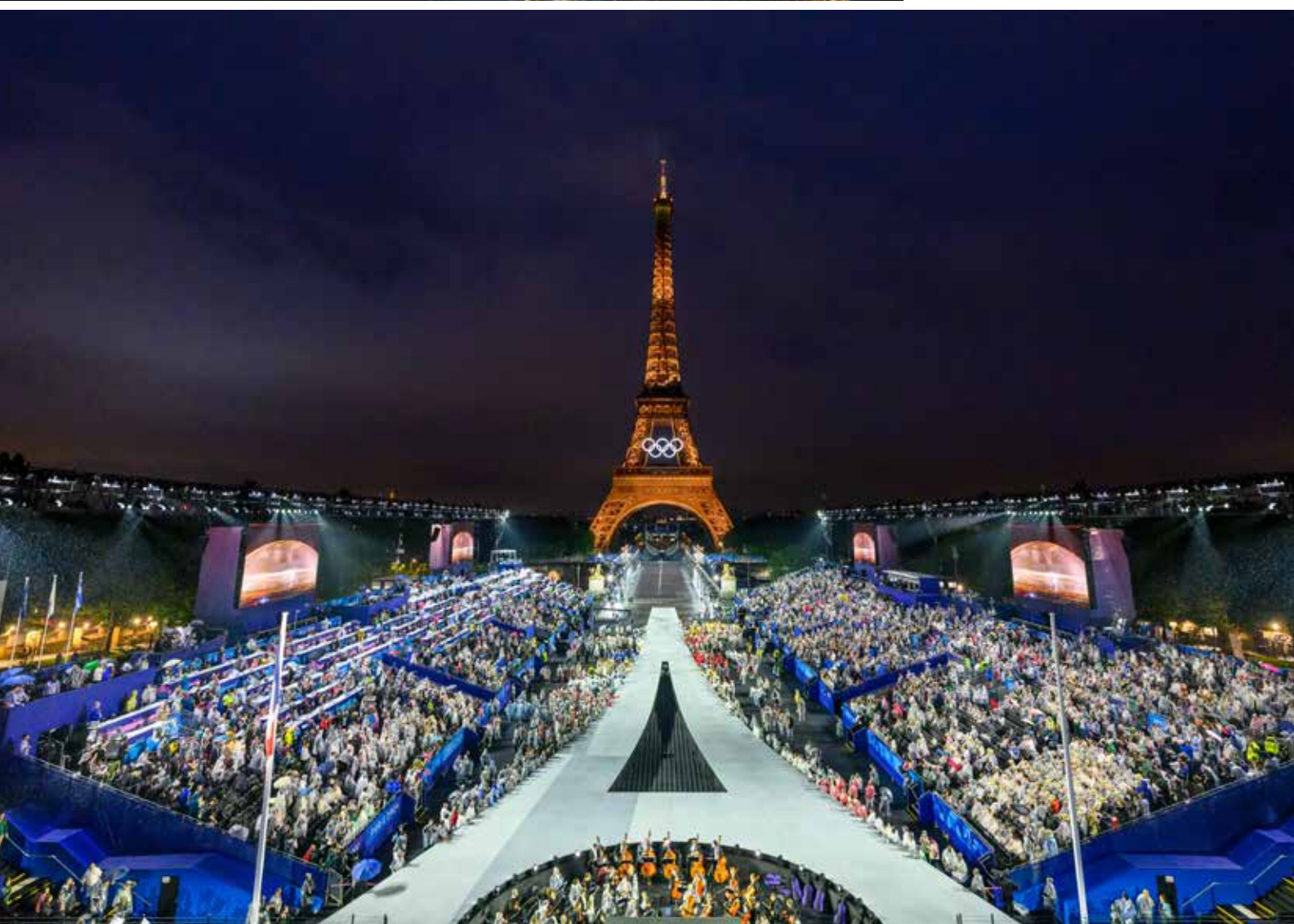
TOP, LUIS TATO/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES;
BOTTOM, CHANDAN KHANNA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES





Top, rockets fired from southern Lebanon are intercepted by the Iron Dome air defense system over northern Israel, amid ongoing cross-border clashes between Israeli troops and Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters (Aug. 4, 2024). Middle East tensions soared when Iran and its allies readied their response to the assassination of Hamas's political leader, blamed on Israel, spurring fears of a regional war. Bottom, delegations arrive at the Trocadero venue during the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games, with the Eiffel Tower in the background, in Paris, France (July 26, 2024).

TOP, JALAA MAREY/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES;
BOTTOM, FRANCOIS-XAVIER MARIT/GETTY IMAGES



People rush to humanitarian aid packages dropped over the northern Gaza Strip amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the militant group Hamas (April 23, 2024).

AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Should I be worried about AI?



Predictions about artificial intelligence range from apocalyptic scenarios to utopian fantasies, yet these miss a critical lesson to learn from AI.

BY JUSTIN M. FRAZIER



ASKING AN artificial intelligence chatbot if you should fear AI feels like asking the fox if you should worry about him guarding the henhouse. You would expect the answer to be a resounding, “No, of course not!”

But that is probably not what you will get. Most AI chatbots seem surprisingly aware of the potential problems they bring. Perplexity.ai, a publicly available AI, says: “Concerns about artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly prevalent, with many individuals expressing fears regarding its impact on jobs, decision-making, and societal norms.”

There is even a term for this: AI anxiety. Although no single definition has gained widespread acceptance, AI anxiety encompasses a spectrum of apprehension about artificial intelligence in society.

International professional services firm Ernst and Young found in a 2023 business survey that 71 percent of employees had concerns about AI. Nearly three-quarters of those surveyed worried about how AI could negatively impact their incomes, while about two-thirds worried about losing promotions or falling behind because they did not use or understand the technology.

A study by the meditation and mindfulness app Calm found that nearly a third of adults are anxious about AI, with 18 percent of respondents feeling fear or dread. The same study also found that 21 percent were excited or optimistic about how AI could impact the world and society.

Amid all the world’s armed conflicts, environmental and ecological changes, and political and religious extremism, do you need to add worrying about artificially intelligent robots to the list? If governments can control AI, what is to prevent someone with ill intent from releasing a malignant AI into the wild?

How much should you really fear the rise of AI?

What Is It?

Much of the concern comes from the many news stories about generative AI. The most well-known model is

ChatGPT. The name comes from Chat plus “Generative Pre-trained Transformer.”

ChatGPT takes a human-supplied prompt and generates a unique answer. Generative AI models are pre-trained on vast amounts of data from sources such as web pages, news stories and forums. Because of this, they are called large language models (LLMs), which are capable of responding to user input in a conversational manner.

However, AI encompasses much more than online chatbots. ColdFusion TV expands the definition of AI to any “machine or a computer program that learns how to do tasks that require forms of intelligence and are usually done by humans.”

Generative AI models typically take one input, such as text, image, video or audio, and generate something new. ChatGPT and several other AIs have also become multimodal, meaning they can take multiple input types and generate new text, images, sounds or video.

Based on most news reporting, it would be easy to think this is all there is, but AI encompasses much more.

Computer vision models are used in doorbell cameras to tell you a person is on your porch or allow self-driving vehicles to “see” the world. Speech recognition models transcribe spoken words into text, do real-time language translation and convert written text into speech.

Reinforcement learning models can adapt by interacting with their environment and are heavily used in gaming, robotics and autonomous systems such as self-driving cars.

AI models *appear* to be incredibly smart because they can collate disparate facts and knowledge from the dataset they were trained on to produce something new and interesting. Yet the word “appear” is key—as AI does not think or understand in a human sense. Its primary function is to produce responses that match patterns and probabilities based on the available information. When faced

with insufficient or unclear information, they are known to “hallucinate,” a polite way of saying “make stuff up.”

For this reason, nearly every AI company will tell you to verify what its model says.

To help me understand AI better, I asked Perplexity.ai some questions.

When asked what human age it compares itself to, it returned: “One might liken advanced AI capabilities to those of a highly educated adult—perhaps someone in their late 20s to early 30s—who possesses a vast amount of factual knowledge but may lack the emotional depth and experiential wisdom that comes with age.”

To be clear, AI cannot truly be compared to a 30-year-old. LLMs are just computer software.

Perplexity.ai made this clear: “If I were to choose an animal that reflects my emotional depth and experiential wisdom in a metaphorical sense...I might be compared to a parrot. Parrots are intelligent birds known for their ability to mimic human speech and respond to social cues. They can learn from their environment and interact with humans in engaging ways.”

As with parrots, artificial intelligence models can mimic human speech or art but cannot understand their meaning. While parrots can form bonds and exhibit limited emotional behaviors, AI systems can only *mimic* emotional interactions.

Most of the current AI models are “expert systems” trained to do one task well. While the conversation skills of ChatGPT and other LLMs make it seem like they can do anything, they can only find patterns in language and return what they find.

British science-fiction author Arthur C. Clarke wrote in his essay “Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination” that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Artificial intelligence currently falls into this descrip-



tion. It is more advanced than what we are used to, but it is still just a technology.

What Is the Worst that Could Happen?

Hollywood has done a good job of stoking fear of AI with movies such as *The Terminator* and *Ex Machina*. In these scenarios, a very advanced artificial intelligence escapes human control, with apocalyptic consequences in the former film and an unknown future in the latter.

The concept of one of man's creations becoming sentient is fascinating and terrifying. Could something we create become more intelligent than us and eventually try to replace us?

Despite the vivid scenarios depicted in these movies, the likelihood of a world-ruling AI is minimal at best. In order for there to be an actual worry, scientists would need to advance AI technology to an artificial general intelligence (AGI)—something currently well outside the realm of possibility.

IBM.com defines AGI as “a hypothetical stage in the development of machine learning (ML) in which an artificial intelligence (AI) system can match or exceed the cognitive abilities of human beings across any task. It represents the fundamental, abstract goal of AI development: the artificial replication of human intelligence in a machine or software.”

Yet the leap from our current technology to the technology needed to build Skynet from *The Terminator* is staggering. To create a central brain with helper robot drones would require a prohibitive amount of processors, both CPUs and GPUs, storage, and memory. These robots and the central brain would need to connect with neuromorphic hardware replicating how a human brain works. While research in this field continues, nothing even close currently exists.

One current cause for concern is the implementation of AI in weapons of war. In the Israel-Hamas conflict, the Israeli army used weapons with built-in AI designed to increase the lethality by two to three times.

Ukrainian startups are using AI to power vast swarms of drones to combat signal jamming by the Russians and enable groups of drones to work together. One system under development would allow swarms of different kinds of drones to work together for surveillance and payload delivery, making decisions on their own but waiting for a human to approve any strikes.

While humans have difficulty managing more than five drones, a single AI system could potentially manage hundreds. The AI would allow drone operators to pull back from the front lines, saving friendly lives while more effectively killing the enemy.

“Could something we create become more intelligent than us and eventually try to replace us?”

The current state of military AI still requires a human to greenlight a kill. Yet, with the way the world is, some person or nation could potentially build an automated killing machine and release it. However, without an autonomous support system that can keep it powered, serviced and supplied with ammunition, the idea of a sweeping wave of unfeeling machines destroying everyone in their path still belongs only in the movies.

Five Concerns

When asked about the scariest aspects of AI, x.com's Grok 2 model gave five potential concerns for the technology.

Job displacement ranks first. AI shines by automating repetitive tasks that humans currently do. When these tasks involve risks to people, switching to automated systems makes those processes more efficient and safer but costs people their jobs. AI has the potential to disrupt entire job categories.

However, up to this point, every major disruptive technology has cre-

ated more jobs than it destroyed. The new jobs usually require higher skills and subsequently have higher pay. A 2020 report from the World Economic Forum estimated that AI and automation would eliminate 85 million jobs by 2025, but would create 97 million jobs in the same time-frame. The transition from manual to automated workforces will be difficult in specific locales as companies and industries that cannot adjust to AI close or change. Still, the overall benefit to jobs and the economy outweighs those difficulties.

Secondly, Grok points to the existential risks of an AI gaining sentience and surpassing humanity. As previously stated, a true AGI is full of complex challenges that we are nowhere near overcoming. AI also operates within specific parameters, which are less guardrails to keep it on track and more the scope of where the AI has autonomy. Current AI systems do not possess the ability to self-evolve or develop a conscience.

Grok's third scary concern is misinformation and deepfakes. AI's ability to create believable content could impact elections, sway public opinion or destroy reputations. However, manipulation like this has been happening for a long time.

Thankfully, as digital manipulation improves with AI, so do the tools to spot and combat it. The annual Consumer Electronics Show, scheduled for January 2025, has a talk planned about using AI to fight deepfakes, disinformation and misinformation. The ongoing AI arms race between bad actors and defenders of truth will continue, with the likely outcome being a stalemate.

The fourth aspect that Grok pointed out is privacy concerns. AI systems require large amounts of data for training and could be vulnerable to breaches unless properly secured. Some people worry about the privacy implications of using that data and copyright infringement. However, as AI defenders improve, the ability to encrypt sensitive data and detect

anomalies, e.g., hacking attempts to steal personal data from corporate systems, will work to protect our data more than expose it.

Finally, Grok points out AI's propensity to show bias and discrimination. Any artificial or natural intelligence will have biases based on how it learned. Education and interaction with different types of people help to erode biases in people, but AI can amplify the patterns of belief from the data sets it learned from. There is a growing emphasis on ethical AI development, including more diverse datasets.

Bias is probably the strongest reason to have AI anxiety.

Mirror of Ourselves

AI reflects humanity. You could think of it as a mirror. It starts by reflecting its creators—the developers who generally want to make the world a better place, but are biased towards science and logic as the solution to all the world's problems.

It then reflects the biases of the data used to train it. An AI trained with Stalinist writings may suggest starving millions of people to teach them a lesson, while an AI trained on Mahatma Gandhi's writings would advocate for a peaceful resolution to conflict. An AI trained solely on Russian culture would have a very different set of biases from those trained on Chinese, German or Israeli cultures.

Another aspect of a mirror also comes into play: its size. A mirror can only reflect a small portion of everything a person can see. Similarly, AI can only reflect a small portion of what humanity is.

AI is ultimately a smaller, less-developed version of our collective selves.

We are not the first ones to have the goal of creating something like ourselves. In Genesis 1:26-27, God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness...So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them."

We are very similar to God physically, mentally and emotionally. But as the AIs that we create are a smaller, less well-formed version of us, each of us is a lesser version of God.

For instance, God tells us that, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are...My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9). That should be easy to understand. The mind that created the beauty and complexity of the universe surpasses our human ability.

But humanity as a group has achieved amazing things. There was a time when unchecked ingenuity and industriousness gave God reason for concern. After Noah's Flood, as people began to replenish the Earth, they decided to build a tower to reach the heavens: "And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men built. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now *nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do*" (Gen. 11:5-6).

God then changed people's languages and sent them around the globe to prevent man from devolving into the worst version of himself.

AI does have the potential to unite people and cultures on a scale not seen since the Tower of Babel. However, achieving this would require a supercomputer as large as the entire internet to train the necessary model. Storing the trained model alone would demand as much storage as all the laptops, desktops, phones, data centers and storage systems in the world combined. Operating such a system would require fusion energy to meet its immense power needs. Even if we could overcome these challenges, the result would still only be a *reflection* of humanity, not something greater.

AI excels at tasks requiring speed, precision and

data analysis. However, true creativity, intuition, ethical judgment, emotional intelligence, adaptability, context awareness and experiential wisdom will remain the domain of humans.

AI's greatest utility comes when it is paired with a person. This involves collaborative problem-solving, where the AI can find patterns that the human can use to make better decisions and drive innovation.

Similarly—and to an infinitely greater degree—people's minds work better when paired with God's mind. Paul told the Philippians to "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

Imagine being able to gain insight from the mind that knows great things like "the number of the stars [and] calls them all by their names" (Psa. 17:4) while knowing the smallest things like the number of hairs on your head and when a single sparrow falls to the ground (Matt. 10:29-30; Luke 12:6-7)!

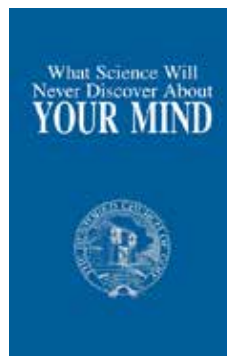
When David said, "for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psa. 139:14), this is most true of the human mind! Yet God, in His wisdom, left the human mind incomplete, requiring His Spirit to unlock its full potential.

Without this vital connection, mankind cannot fulfill its awesome purpose.

Return to the question, "Should I be worried about AI?" The simple answer is no. AI is merely a tool in the hands of people. While a few may misuse it for harmful purposes, most will use it to enhance their lives and work.

Such worries can be overcome through God's Holy Spirit. In II Timothy 1:7, it states: "For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

To learn more about this incredible potential and God's Spirit, read our booklet *What Science Will Never Discover About Your Mind*. □




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Why Does PROPHECY FOCUS *on* JERUSALEM?

Learn why this ancient city continues
to shape global events.

BY SAMUEL C. BAXTER



The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Engraving by Louis Haghe after a painting by David Roberts.

HISTORICAL PICTURE ARCHIVE/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

DOES GOD play favorites? When it comes to Jerusalem, it can certainly seem so. In II Chronicles 6:6, He declares: “But I have chosen Jerusalem, that My name might be there.” Zechariah 2:8 calls the city “the apple of His eye.”

No other city has this distinction: “For the LORD has chosen Zion [the Temple Mount in Jerusalem]; He has desired it for His dwelling place: This is My resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it” (Psa. 132:13-14, New King James Version).

Throughout the Bible, God emphasizes Jerusalem’s special status—not merely as a site of historical importance, but as the focal point of His plan for mankind. He appoints it as the ultimate throne of His government: “At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the LORD; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem...” (Jer. 3:17).

The Bible could be seen as the story of Abraham, the Israelites, or of Jesus Christ and the New Testament Church. Yet it is just as much the story of Jerusalem.

The word Jerusalem appears 811 times in the King James Bible, with Zion mentioned another 152 times. Jesus Himself linked end-time events to the city in His Olivet Prophecy: “And when you shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh” (Luke 21:20). And the Bible ends with New Jerusalem descending to Earth as the eternal capital of God’s Kingdom (Rev. 21).

This biblical focus birthed a historical obsession with Jerusalem. From Old Testament times to today, it has been a center of world events. The city has been destroyed twice—by the Babylonians in 586 BC and the Romans in AD 70—and has changed hands over 20 times through wars and conquests by the Israelites, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Muslims, Crusaders, Ottomans and the British. Its unmatched religious significance to Judaism, Christianity and Islam has fueled countless conflicts.

Today, Jerusalem remains in the headlines, with wars, peace talks and religious disputes continually swirling around this city. Clearly, God intended the story of Jerusalem to be inseparable from the narrative of the Bible and human history.

Why such intense focus on one city?

Early Significance

Jerusalem’s prominence in the story of the Bible began over 800 years before David conquered it as leader of the nation of Israel. The book of Genesis introduces us to Melchizedek, who is “King of Salem” (Gen. 14:18). Salem is an early name for Jerusalem. Melchizedek, described in Hebrews 7:3 as “having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God,” was none other than the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ.

Abraham’s encounter with this righteous king set a foundational precedent: Jerusalem would be a city of divine significance.

In Salem, God reconfirmed promises with Abraham that his descendants would bless all nations and inherit the land (Gen. 12:2-3; 15:4-7). These promises were both physical, involving the land of Canaan and Abraham’s descendants, and spiritual, pointing to Christ and His ultimate sacrifice for humanity.

Years later, Abraham returned to the same location. It was here that God tested Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22). The account says they went to “the land of Moriah” (vs. 2), which is the same as today’s Temple Mount. Though God stopped him from completing the act, the patriarch’s obedience demonstrated profound faith in God’s Plan, in which Isaac was to play a crucial part.

The selection of Jerusalem in the early pages of the Bible reveals God’s incredible long-term vision. He sets out to do something and then slowly and surely—over the millennia—brings His plans to pass.

Isaiah 46 highlights this characteristic: “Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like Me,

declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure” (vs. 9-10).

Verse 11 concludes this about everything God sets out to do, including all Bible prophecies: “I have purposed it, I will also do it.”

That same mount in Jerusalem where God tested Abraham with Isaac’s sacrifice became the site of the Temple, a physical representation of God dwelling among His people. These events in Genesis foreshadowed the central role Jerusalem would play in Israel’s history, the coming of Jesus Christ—and forever in the Kingdom of God.

Building Up Jerusalem

It was not until centuries later that Jerusalem returned to the forefront of the Biblical narrative. Yet God had not forgotten this location. David, the second king of Israel, established Jerusalem as a permanent city and the center of Israelite worship and governance.

From this point forward, Jerusalem as a physical and spiritual capital remains a central theme of God’s Word.

After David defeated the Jebusites and conquered Jerusalem, he brought the Ark of the Covenant to the city. The ark symbolized God’s presence among His people (II Sam. 6:17). David bought the hill that would become the Temple Mount (24:18-25) and made plans to build a permanent Temple for God: “See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells within curtains [the Tabernacle]” (7:2).

David’s son Solomon carried out this vision for a Temple, constructing the magnificent building in Jerusalem (I Kgs. 6:1-14). During Solomon’s reign, Jerusalem reached a golden age, characterized by peace and abundance. The Bible describes this era with prosperous imagery: “And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, *every man under his vine and under his fig tree*, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon” (4:25).

Micah 4:4 uses identical language to describe conditions in God’s Kingdom.

When fulfilling prophecy, God often works in “similitudes” (Hos. 12:10). He uses smaller fulfillments before the grander ones to come. The forerunner examples hint at God’s ultimate purposes.

Events in Jerusalem during this time also reveal lessons for Bible readers (I Cor. 10:12).

During the reign of Solomon, there was incredible prosperity—with “silver as common in Jerusalem as stones” (I Kgs. 10:27)—but there were also many signs of the kingdom’s downfall. Solomon’s tolerance of idolatry and alliances with pagan nations led to spiritual decay. This failure, along with subsequent generations’ disobedience, resulted in Jerusalem’s decline and eventual destruction by the Babylonians.

While David and Solomon’s rulership highlighted Jerusalem’s potential to reflect God’s glory, it also revealed something crucial: Under human leaders—no matter how wise or well-intentioned—these efforts will fall short.

Isaiah 1 reveals how God viewed the city’s fall into sin: “How is the faithful city become a harlot! It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers” (vs. 21). This statement also applies to Jerusalem today!

After Solomon’s reign, the Israelites repeatedly went into captivity, with only the tribe of Judah returning and rebuilding the Temple under Zerubbabel. This set up the next prophetic chapter for the city.

Christ’s Ministry

Jerusalem played a pivotal role in the ministry of Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, Zechariah foretold His triumphal entry into the city: “Behold, your King comes unto you: He is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon a [donkey]” (9:9). This prophecy was fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem to cheers of “Hosanna to the Son of David!” (Matt. 21:9).

Though welcomed by the crowds, Christ’s words around that time exposed the city’s true spiri-

tual state. He lamented: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which kills the prophets, and stones them that are sent unto you; how often would I have gathered your children together, as a hen does gather her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Luke 13:34).

These words reveal His heartache over a city that repeatedly turned its back on God, even while it remained at the center of His purpose.

Jerusalem was the stage for what appeared to be humanity’s darkest moment—but it really provided great hope.

Here, Christ was betrayed, unjustly condemned and crucified outside its walls. Yet even these tragic events fulfilled God’s Plan. The prophets had long pointed to Jesus’ suffering and sacrifice.

Isaiah foretold, “He [Jesus] was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed” (53:5). Christ’s brutal death paid the ultimate price for sin, making it possible for humanity to be reconciled to God.

Fifty days after Christ’s resurrection, Jerusalem became the birthplace of the New Testament Church. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon His disciples (Acts 2:1-4). This moment marked the beginning of God expanding His Work beyond the physical descendants of Abraham. From Jerusalem, the Church began its mission to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God.

These events set the stage for Jerusalem’s ultimate prophetic destiny.

Spiritual Parallels

While prophecy often highlights physical Jerusalem, it also points to a spiritual fulfillment.

The New Testament describes “Jerusalem above” as the “mother of us all” (Gal. 4:26). This spiritual Jerusalem represents the Church, composed of individuals called out of the world to live according to God’s ways (John 6:44). These people are heirs of the promises made to Abraham and the descendants of Israel.

Recall New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. It reflects God's goal for humanity: A reconciled relationship with Him where everyone has a chance to be born into His Family.

Verse 3 explains more about this spiritual city: "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God."

New Jerusalem represents the fulfillment of God's promises to bring peace and righteousness to the Earth, making it a beacon of hope for all nations.

The Church, as spiritual Israel (Gal. 6:16), is preparing now to rule with Jesus Christ from this eternal city. The parallel between physical and spiritual Jerusalem highlights the depth of God's Plan for working with mankind. Each individual Christian is called to play a personal role in this Kingdom (Rev. 3:12).

What's Next for Jerusalem

Today, Jerusalem is marked by ongoing war, religious tensions and deep divisions among its inhabitants. Violence is a constant, fueled by long-standing conflicts and competing claims over the city. Idolatry and religious confusion are widespread. Instead of a city of peace and righteousness, modern Jerusalem remains a place of strife, sin and spiritual confusion.

Zechariah 1:13 reveals—despite Jerusalem's current sin and lawlessness—that God has "good words and comfortable words" for the city.

When God sets up His Kingdom, He declares: "I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: My house shall be built in it...and the LORD shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem" (vs. 16-17).

Prophecy shows God wants to restore His relationship with His people and make Jerusalem a model of divine government.

Isaiah records God's promise to purge the city and make it a center of righteousness: "I will turn My hand upon you, and purely purge away your

dross...Afterward you shall be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city" (1:25-26).

The next chapter fleshes out God's plans for Jerusalem: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it" (2:2).

For what purpose? "And many people shall go and say, Come you, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (vs. 3).

To truly be a "city of righteousness," the inhabitants of Jerusalem will need to learn many lessons. The same applies to anyone who wants to go up to Jerusalem to learn God's ways. If God is to purge away the people's dross—meaning their flaws and impurities—this will require correction.

Those who do not obey God during His Kingdom will become examples of the consequences of continued disobedience.

Read Ezekiel: "Thus says the Lord GOD; This is Jerusalem: I have set it in the midst of the nations...and she has changed My judgments into wickedness more than the nations" (5:5-6). God positioned Jerusalem as an example to the world. It can either demonstrate the blessings that come with obedience—or the fruits of rebellion.

The goal is for everyone to follow God's Way, not just physical Israelites.

Psalm 87 reveals the expansive nature of the Kingdom. It describes a time when individuals from every nation can be recognized as citizens of Zion.

Verse 6 states, "The LORD shall count, when He writes up the people, that this one was born there." This poetic language emphasizes that citizenship in Zion is not determined by physical birth or ancestry but by embracing God's way of life. The New Living Translation makes this clearer: "When the LORD registers the nations,

He will say, 'They have all become citizens of Jerusalem.'"

The chapter explains that even nations historically opposed to God—such as Rahab (Egypt) and Babylon—will have this opportunity.

A Personal Challenge

Despite its failures, God has never given up on Jerusalem. From its ancient roots to its prophetic future, the city serves as a microcosm of His divine Plan—a place of both judgment and restoration, showcasing humanity's struggles and God's boundless mercy. Its history is a testament to God's patience and determination in working with mankind.

The city's ultimate destiny lies in the arrival of New Jerusalem, where God's presence will dwell with humanity in peace and righteousness.

When this city arrives, all of its sadness and problems will go away: "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

How different from Jerusalem today!

The prophetic plan for Jerusalem is not just a lofty ideal or fascinating Bible study topic—it presents a personal challenge to anyone who wants to seek God.

Just as God long ago selected Jerusalem as His eternal headquarters, He is now working with those chosen "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4), meaning individuals who obey Him now. As with Jerusalem, God will work with them, guide them and correct them when needed to become a "city set on a hill" (Matt. 5:14)—both in this age and the world to come.

If this message resonates with you, take the time to consider whether God is working with you. Recognizing and acting on His plan for your life is the most important step you can take. Start by reading "Are You Being Called?" at rcg.org/aybc. The opportunity is in front of you—what will you do? □

4 Bible Lessons for Dating

God's Word contains timeless principles that make dating a fulfilling
and enriching experience.

BY SAMUEL E. MAIDEN



DATING TODAY can feel like a maze. For many, it is a complex, laborious journey with no clear direction or end in sight.

The rise of dating apps and websites, such as Tinder and eHarmony, have created unprecedented opportunities to meet potential partners, but these platforms also bring their own challenges. With seemingly endless options at one's fingertips, many experience frustration or decision fatigue. Add to this the ever-present risk of being "ghosted"—where someone you are interested in abruptly stops communicating—and it is easy to see why dating can be an emotional rollercoaster for so many.

Complicating matters further, people enter the dating world with vastly different expectations.

Some seek long-term, committed relationships, while others are primarily interested in casual companionship. Others simply want sex, avoiding commitment altogether.

This wide disparity of intentions can lead to mismatched expectations and, ultimately, disappointment. It is no surprise that a recent Pew Research study found that 56 percent of single adults in the United States are not actively looking to date. They may be thinking: Why go through the frustration, the heartbreak—the uncertainty?

At its core, dating is about finding love. Yet this can feel elusive in a world of conflicting intentions. The Bible cuts through all the confusion. It teaches that true love is not merely a fleeting feeling—it is central to God's character. As I John 4:8 states, "God is love."

Understand. God is not only the source of love but also the ultimate authority on relationships, including dating. His Word is a steady source of guidance for those willing to follow it. Its lessons will help anyone navigate the challenges of dating.

The Purpose of Dating

What is the purpose of dating? Rather than being an end in itself or a pursuit of personal gratification, dating

serves a far greater purpose. While the Bible does not specifically mention dating, it does provide timeless principles regarding relationships and the sanctity of marriage.

Dating, done properly, can be fun and rewarding. But its ultimate goal should be to discern whether a man and a woman are compatible for marriage.

God is the author of marriage. He ordained it from the very beginning of mankind. Genesis 2:24 explains, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." Marriage is a divine institution established by God. "One flesh" refers to sex within marriage.

God is ready to guide those who seek Him through every step of the process leading to marriage, including dating.

Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us to, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart; and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths."

God wants you to be happy and successful in all areas of life. This includes dating. If you commit your dating process to God, He will guide the process and its outcome.

Now, let's examine four principles God's Word offers that apply to dating.

(1) Build Friendship First

Today, many fear being "friend zoned." *Merriam-Webster* defines friend zone as "a state of friendship in which one's romantic or sexual interest in someone is not reciprocated."

Many singles believe that if their dating prospect sees them as just a friend, this could jeopardize their chances of a romantic relationship. This fear leads some to rush into expressing romantic intentions without first establishing a meaningful connection.

However, the truth is starting with friendship is the best way to build a solid relationship that lasts. Proverbs 17:17 says, "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."

A strong friendship provides stability and support, no matter what life

throws your way. And when you have that kind of connection as the foundation for a relationship, it is easier to handle the ups and downs that come with a possible romance.

Friendship encourages healthy communication. It allows people to discuss important topics like beliefs, family, ambitions and even challenges they are facing in life. This type of connection builds trust and understanding, both of which are critical in a romantic relationship.

The Bible says a lot about the value of friendship. Proverbs 18:24 states, "A man that has friends must show himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticks closer than a brother."

This emphasizes the deep bond of true friendship. While family relationships are important, sometimes a friend can provide support, understanding and companionship that even surpasses the closeness of blood relatives. That kind of bond is what makes relationships strong.

Avoid trying to label your relationship too soon or forcing romance. Instead, seek to build friendship and let love grow naturally.

(2) Practice Patience and Self-control

Patience and self-control are essential when approaching dating, especially in a world that encourages rushing into relationships and intimacy. These qualities allow for thoughtful decision-making and emotional stability, and will help you avoid common pitfalls that lead to heartache and regret.

Proverbs 4:23 provides timeless advice: "Keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."

The Hebrew word translated "keep" here means to guard. Guarding your heart means allowing emotions to develop naturally rather than rushing into romantic attachments or premature commitments. Patience and self-control will help you manage your thoughts, feelings and actions.

These qualities are often neglected with physical intimacy. Many singles rush into sexual relationships, either for short-term pleasure or because they

think it will bring them closer to their partner.

However, this approach is NOT what God desires. Sexual intimacy is a gift from God, designed to be enjoyed within the covenant of marriage.

Rushing into this aspect of a relationship will lead to emotional pain and other problems. By waiting for intimacy according to God's timing, couples experience a deeper sense of fulfillment that far outweighs the fleeting gratification of lust.

Proverbs 25:28 says, "He that has no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls." Whether you are a man or a woman, stay in control while dating. Do not allow yourself to get swept up in passion and do something you will regret.

Patience and self-control serve as safeguards in dating. They help protect your heart and ensure that relationships are built on mutual respect and understanding. By cultivating these qualities, you set the stage for a relationship that is not only fulfilling but also honors God's purpose for love and companionship.

(3) Focus on Serving

One of the most transformative principles of dating God's way is learning to focus on serving.

In a society that so often encourages self-centeredness, this approach prioritizes the well-being and happiness of the other person. Rather than asking, "What can I get out of this relationship?", serving others means asking, "What can I give?"

Philippians 2:3-4 captures the essence of this mindset: "Let nothing be done through strife or vain-glory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."

This verse supports that a truly fulfilling relationship requires humility and selflessness.

When both individuals are committed to serving each other, any date

or relationship becomes a space of mutual respect and support rather than a one-sided pursuit of personal gain.

True love is not transactional. You do not serve someone because you expect something in return. This means putting aside personal desires and pride to focus on benefiting the other person.

For example, a man can serve by thoroughly planning a date, showing that thought and care went into it. The lady can contribute by being engaged and present on the date and sharing her thoughts and ideas in conversation. In such a scenario, both are focused on giving the best experience to the other.

Focusing on serving others transforms dating from a self-focused pursuit into a meaningful opportunity to show outgoing concern.

(4) Commit to Personal Growth

Before entering a serious relationship, it is vital to prioritize your own development. Dating often emphasizes finding the right person, but *becoming* the right person is just as important.

Investing in your own physical, spiritual and emotional development ensures that you bring maturity and stability into any relationship.

God's Word teaches us the value of personal growth. In I Corinthians 13:11, Paul writes, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things." In other words, Paul grew up. Read all of I Corinthians 13, commonly called the "love chapter." It shows us that maturity is essential in all aspects of life, including relationships.

Take time to cultivate essential life skills. Self-reflection is a key part of this process. Consider areas where you need to grow, and be willing to put in the effort to improve.

For example, if you struggle with finances, create and stick to a monthly budget. Learn how to save for future needs and reduce unnecessary debt. If you struggle with communication, work

on it. Dating is the perfect opportunity to practice good communication skills.

These areas of growth reflect a sense of responsibility and readiness to contribute positively to a relationship.

God has given every person unique talents and abilities, and it is our responsibility to develop and use them. For instance, someone with a natural aptitude for music could take lessons to hone their craft. If you are gifted in hospitality, you could start hosting gatherings to practice making others feel welcome and valued.

When you invest in becoming the best version of yourself, you honor God and prepare to bring your full potential into any relationship He may lead you to.

Enjoy the Process

Dating should be a pleasant experience, not a stressful pursuit. Sharing enjoyable activities, laughing together and creating lighthearted moments are essential parts of building a connection.

God designed us to experience joy, and dating, when approached with the right mindset, can be a time of happiness.

The Bible's principles for dating demonstrate God's incredible knowledge and wisdom. Following His Way may not always feel easy or natural in a culture that often disregards biblical values. But God's Word provides guidance that protects your heart, fosters genuine connection and equips you to build relationships that honor Him.

Approach dating as a time of discovery and growth. While society's dating practices often lead to confusion and disappointment, following God's way brings peace, fulfillment and lasting joy.

To learn more, read our free book *Dating and Courtship God's Way* at rcg.org/aadac. This comprehensive guide covers the importance of emotional maturity, the significance of spiritual compatibility, and even more advice on avoiding common dating pitfalls—all grounded in biblical principles that lead to long-term fulfillment. □

The Stunning Fall of SYRIA'S GOVERNMENT

THE SYRIAN government fell early on December 8 in a stunning end to the 50-year rule of the Assad family after a sudden rebel offensive sprinted across government-held territory and entered the capital in 10 days.

Syrian state television aired a video statement by a group of men saying that President Bashar Assad had been overthrown and all detainees in jails had been set free.

The man who read the statement said the Operations Room to Conquer Damascus, an opposition group, called on all opposition fighters and citizens to preserve state institutions of “the free Syrian state.”

The statement emerged hours after the head of a Syrian opposition war monitor said Mr. Assad had left the country for an undisclosed location, fleeing ahead of insurgents who said they had entered Damascus following the remarkably swift advance across the country. The ousted Syrian leader had fled to Moscow and received asylum from his longtime ally, Russian media said later that day.

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali said the government was ready to “extend its hand” to the opposition and turn its functions over to a transitional government.

“I am in my house and I have not left, and this is because of my belonging to this country,” Mr. Jalali said in a video statement. He said he would go to his office to continue work in the morning and called on Syrian citizens not to deface public property.

Aftermath

As daylight broke over Damascus, crowds gathered to pray in the city's mosques and to celebrate in the squares, chanting “God is great.” People also chanted anti-Assad slogans and

A portrait of Syrian President Bashar Assad is pictured with its frame broken, in a Syrian regime Political Security Branch facility on the outskirts of the central city of Hama, following the capture of the area by anti-government forces (Dec. 7, 2024).

OMAR HAJ KADOUR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



honked car horns. In some areas, celebratory gunshots rang out.

Soldiers and police officers left their posts and fled, and looters broke into the headquarters of the Ministry of Defense.

“My feelings are indescribable,” said Omar Daher, a 29-year-old lawyer. “After the fear that he [Mr. Assad] and his father made us live in for many years, and the panic and state of terror that I was living in, I can’t believe it.”

Mr. Daher said his father was killed by security forces and his brother was in detention, his fate unknown.

“Damn his soul and the soul of the entire Assad family,” said Ghazal al-Sharif, another reveler in central Damascus. “It is the prayer of every oppressed person and God answered it today. We thought we would never see it, but thank God, we saw it.”

The police headquarters in the capital appeared to be abandoned, its door left ajar with no officers outside. An *Associated Press* journalist shot footage of an abandoned army checkpoint where uniforms were discarded on the ground under a poster of Mr. Assad’s face. Footage broadcast on opposition-linked media showed a tank in one of the capital’s central squares.

It was the first time opposition forces had reached Damascus since 2018, when Syrian troops recaptured areas on the outskirts of the capital following a yearslong siege.

The pro-government Sham FM radio reported that the Damascus airport had been evacuated and all flights halted.

The insurgents also announced they had entered the notorious Saydnaya military prison north of the capital and “liberated” their prisoners there.

The night before, opposition forces took the central city of Homs, Syria’s third largest, as government forces abandoned it. The city stands at an important intersection between Damascus, the capital, and Syria’s coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus—the Syrian leader’s base of support and home to a Russian strategic naval base.

The rebels had already seized the cities of Aleppo and Hama, as well as large parts of the south, in a lightning offensive that began November 27. Analysts said rebel control of Homs would be a game-changer.

The rebels’ moves into Damascus came after the Syrian army withdrew from much of the southern part of the country, leaving more areas, including several provincial capitals, under the control of opposition fighters.

“The end of the Assad family’s rule is for many Syrians a moment of mixed joy and fear, of the total unknown.”

The advances were by far the largest in recent years by opposition factions, led by a group that has its origins in al-Qaida and is considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the United Nations. In their push to overthrow Mr. Assad’s government, the insurgents, led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, met little resistance from the Syrian army.

In Damascus, people rushed to stock up on supplies. Thousands went to Syria’s border with Lebanon, trying to leave the country. Lebanese border officials closed the main Masnaa border crossing late on December 7, leaving many stuck waiting.

Many shops in the capital were shuttered, a resident told *The Associated Press*, and those still open ran out of staples such as sugar. Some were selling items at three times the normal price.

The UN said it was moving non-critical staff outside the country as a precaution.

The Insurgents’ March

A commander with the insurgents, Hassan Abdul-Ghani, posted on the Telegram messaging app that opposi-

tion forces had begun the “final stage” of their offensive by encircling Damascus.

HTS controls much of northwest Syria and in 2017 set up a “salvation government” to run day-to-day affairs in the region. In recent years, HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani has sought to remake the group’s image, cutting ties with al-Qaida, ditching hard-line officials and vowing to embrace pluralism and religious tolerance.

The Syrian government has referred to opposition gunmen as terrorists since conflict broke out in March 2011.

Qatar’s top diplomat, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, criticized Mr. Assad for failing to take advantage of the lull in fighting in recent years to address the country’s underlying problems. “Assad didn’t seize this opportunity to start engaging and restoring his relationship with his people,” he said.

Joy and Fear

For the first time in 50 years, the question of how Syria will be governed is wide open. The end of the Assad family’s rule is for many Syrians a moment of mixed joy and fear, of the total unknown.

The insurgency that swept Mr. Assad out of power is rooted in Islamist jihadi fighters. Its leader says he has renounced past ties to al-Qaida, and he has gone out of his way to assert a vision of creating a pluralistic Syria governed by civil institutions—not dictators and not ideology.

But even if he is sincere, he is not the only player. The insurgency is made up of multiple factions, and the country is riven among armed groups, including U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters controlling the east. Remnants of the old regime’s military—and its feared security and intelligence services—could coalesce once again.

Foreign powers with their own interests have their hands deep in the country, and any of them—Russia, Iran, Turkey, the United States and Israel—could act as spoilers.

Syria’s multifaith and multiethnic population sees itself poised on

a moment that could tip either into chaos or cohesion. The country's Sunni Muslims, Shiite Alawites, Christians and ethnic Kurds have often been pitted against each, whether by Mr. Assad's rule or a 14-year civil war.

Divisions from the conflict run deep, and many worry about revenge killings, whether against former figures of Mr. Assad's state or—more frightening—whole communities seen as backing the old system.

The civil war displaced half of Syria's prewar population of 23 million. Many who fled are watching developments closely to determine whether the time has come to return.

Right now there are only questions.

How Will Syria Be Governed?

In the short period following Mr. Assad's abrupt fall, rebel leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has sought to reassure Syrians that the group he leads—Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS—does not seek to dominate the country and will continue government services. He has spoken of setting up a decentralized governance system.

Government officials who remained in Damascus as Mr. Assad fled—including Prime Minister Jalali—have met with the rebels to discuss the transfer of power.

The *Al Jazeera* television network reported that HTS had decided to appoint the head of the “salvation government” running its stronghold in northwest Syria, Mohammed Al-Bashir, to form a transitional government. There was no official confirmation.

Details on what form the government will take have been scarce.

The rebels likely did not expect to be saddled with running an entire country when they launched their offensive against Aleppo, said Qutaiba Idlbi, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center and Middle East Programs. The rapid fall of Damascus and the melting away of police and military left security challenges, he said.

The only existing framework for a transition is no longer relevant. UN

Security Council Resolution 2254 had called for a political process involving both Mr. Assad's government and opposition groups.

“Everyone's saying, especially rebels on the ground, ‘That framework is no longer applicable, because there is no longer a regime. We're not going to give the regime in politics what they lost through military means,’” Mr. Idlbi said.

In the current chaos, UN workers have had difficulty accessing the country, and that has hampered distribution of humanitarian aid, he said.

How Inclusive Will the Insurgents Be?

The insurgents have sought to reassure Syria's religious minorities that they will not be targeted, despite HTS' fundamentalist Sunni Muslim origins.

As of this writing, the civil peace seems to be holding. The insurgents have appeared disciplined, working to keep order, with no sign of reprisals. Experts say only time will tell what post-Assad Syria will look like.

“Everyone's still willing to really engage, really work with others,” said Haid Haid, a consulting fellow at the Middle East and North Africa program of Chatham House. “That sort of positive atmosphere is crucial, but it might not last long.”

Splits could open as decisions are made.

It cannot be guaranteed all the fighters within the HTS will back Mr. al-Sharaa's talk of a pluralist system. Outside Damascus' historic Hamadiyah market on December 8, around a dozen fighters chanted, “Down, down with a secular state”—a sign that at least some among the insurgents may seek a harder Islamist line.

“The opposition is not a homogeneous movement,” said Burcu Ozcelik, a senior research fellow for Middle East Security at the Royal United Services Institute think tank in London.

There are multiple armed opposition groups, including forces in the south who are distinct from HTS and the Turkish-backed groups in the north. Internal fractures within the HTS-led movement, “which may become more

salient in the weeks and months to come, may lead to discord and threaten Syrian stability,” Mr. Ozcelik said.

There may be pressure to purge former members of Mr. Assad's large state bureaucracy, especially those employed as part of a vast security state that included informers and officers widely hated for torture, abuses and corruption.

Insurgents and many in the public do not want them to return. But a purge can spark a destabilizing backlash—as when U.S. administrators disbanded Iraq's army after Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, fueling a Sunni insurgency.

Syria's Alawite population is feeling particularly vulnerable. Mr. Assad and his family were Alawites—a branch of Shia Islam—and many among the Sunni insurgents see the community as his loyalists.

The Question of the Kurds Looms Large

Kurdish-led forces allied with the United States have run a semi-autonomous zone in Syria's northeast for years, where they have been a key player in the fight against the Islamic State militant group. While both were opponents of the government during the civil war, the relationship between the Kurds and the Arab opposition groups is tense.

HTS has been extending an olive branch to the Kurds. Reintegrating the east would likely mean some form of concession to Kurdish autonomy.

But that risks angering neighboring Turkey, which vehemently opposes the Kurdish factions that run Syria's east. Already, Turkish-backed insurgents allied with HTS have taken the opportunity to push the Kurds out of some pockets of territory, seizing the northern town of Manbij, and clashes have broken out in other areas.

While the insurgents' largely benign approach to minorities so far has allayed many international worries, Mr. Abdelmoula said, “those pockets of fighting are very significant because the fighting is mostly along ethnic lines. And that's dangerous.” □

Why NEW YEAR'S Resolutions Fail

—and How to Succeed God's Way

Real change is possible. The Bible provides a blueprint.

BY GARRICK R. OXLEY

IT IS a quiet morning in late April at the local YMCA. At 5 a.m., most treadmills, ellipticals, stationary bikes and rowing machines lay dormant, pristine, undisturbed by sweat.

Such a scene lies in stark contrast to what the gym looked like at the same time of day on January 2. The health club was crowded. Members could hardly shove past each other.

These two scenarios showcase the difference between how people act just

after making a New Year's resolution—zealous, dedicated, on fire—and how they act months later.

Of course, this does not only apply to fitness. New Year's resolutions of any kind are now notorious for being doomed to fail. The longtime tradition can begin to feel futile.

People make all kinds of resolutions: Reading more books, quitting smoking, decluttering their home, getting involved in their local community,

going back to college, recycling more—the list could go on.

"If you find yourself in the camp of setting lofty goals for the new year only to find yourself falling off the wagon just months (or weeks) later, rest assured that you're not alone," a *Forbes* article stated. "In fact, failing at New Year's resolutions is so common that there's even a slew of (unofficial) dates commemorating such failures—some sources cite 'Ditch New Year's

Resolutions Day' as January 17 while others denote the second Friday in January as 'Quitter's Day.'"

A survey conducted by Forbes Health/One Poll showed that "the average [New Year's] resolution lasts just 3.74 months. Only 8% of respondents tend to stick with their goals for one month, while 22% last two months, 22% last three months and 13% last four months."

Clearly, New Year's resolutions do not lead to success for most people. Yet this habit stems from a universal human desire: to change. Resolutions are an attempt to make a life change, big or small.

Wanting to change is a good thing. The desire to improve your life is not the problem. What holds us back is how we go about trying to achieve that change.

The Bible is a book about change and success. It does not endorse New Year's resolutions, but it gives us something better: principles from our Creator that really work.

Lamentations 3:40 says, "Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the LORD." Scripture will guide us to "search and try our ways" and make the changes we need, at any time of the year.

Why do New Year's resolutions fail, and how can we use godly principles to achieve lasting success?

Why Do Resolutions Fall Short?

There are various reasons why people do not achieve success with their resolutions. A major culprit is that these goals are often rooted in emotion. We look back on the year and regret choices we made. Or we desire a positive outcome for next year so much that it clouds our judgment.

Maybe we were not as responsible as we could have been with our spending, and we do not have much savings available. We could have shied away from a promotion we were offered at work but later realized we could have taken on the extra responsibility. If we allow our emotions to get the better of us, these setbacks could lead to being

unbalanced in how frugal we are with our spending or how ambitious we are at work going forward, and ultimately we do not achieve what we set out to do.

Or we might have been so excited about accomplishing something—buying a house, getting married, finishing a college degree early—that the positive emotion blinded us to reality. We did not think through whether the goal was attainable and what steps were needed to get there.

Emotion is not a bad thing when it comes to making life changes. It can spur you forward. Yet it cannot be all there is.

Another roadblock is that people make resolutions out of peer pressure or tradition—they go along with what others are doing, but they may not have really wanted to change.

Or a goal was good in principle, but too vague to lead to tangible results. Maybe we set out to "be nicer to people" when something more specific and measurable like "make five new friends" would have been better.

We can also fall prey to focusing too much on surface-level external changes and not enough on internal issues like mindset and character.

Another big reason why New Year's resolutions are ineffective is that they are built on the wrong foundation. The New Year's holiday has its roots in pagan religion. It is built on the unbiblical traditions of men and the worship of false gods. Read "Why Christians Don't Celebrate New Year's" at rcg.org/wcdcnny to learn more.

These issues all point to a central weak spot: a lack of commitment. Committing to the right values in life will help us overcome these obstacles and reach our goals. This is where God's Word comes into the picture. It provides the principles we need to truly commit to success.

Evaluate the Change

If we want to change something in our lives, the first thing to do is to evaluate the change. Romans 12:2 gives us some guidance: "Be not conformed to this

world: but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

There is a lot to unpack here. For one, we are not to conform to this world—including popular views on change and success. We need to make sure what we desire is really what is best for us. We should also avoid comparing ourselves to the level of success we see in other people in the world. The verse also shows that we have to "transform" and "renew" how we look at change. This can be hard, especially if you have been making New Year's resolutions for years or decades.

It also says we must "prove" what needs to be done. This includes proving whether or not the change is needed in the first place, as well as thinking through what we are going to do to bring it about.

For Christians, this includes evaluating whether certain decisions are God's will or not, as the verse also said.

Does what you are seeking to do line up with God's purpose for your life? Some goals have a more obvious answer to this question than others.

Evaluating whether a change is God's will involves studying the Bible to see what He has to say about it. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."

This part of the process can also involve getting help and advice from others. Proverbs 11:14 says, "Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety."

Prepare and Count the Cost

What should we do after settling on a desired change? Proverbs 24:27 says, "Prepare your work without, and make it fit for yourself in the field; and afterwards build your house."

Just as a contractor would not immediately start building a house, garage or apartment building without evaluating the land's suitability for construction, we should not rush into our goals haphazardly.

We need to develop a solid plan. Proverbs 29:18 says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Develop a clear picture of the end result as well as the intermediate steps it requires.

In Luke 14, Jesus taught: “For which of you, intending to build a tower, sits not down first, and counts the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish” (vs. 28-30).

Whether we think of the bystanders in Jesus’ time laughing at the man who could not finish his building or we picture the regulars at the YMCA chuckling about the new members who stopped coming, this kind of mockery can be prevented by a simple exercise: counting the cost.

Like maintaining your household budget, counting the cost with our goals involves making sure we have enough resources to achieve what we set out to do.

This can involve a literal monetary cost, but also other elements: the amount of time you have in the day, the knowledge to achieve it, support from others, etc.

For example, if your goal is to journal every day, you will have to count the cost of incorporating this into your schedule. This could require you to cut back on another hobby you already have, or get up earlier to fit in your new endeavor.

Wisely thinking through our plans puts us in position to execute them effectively. Proverbs 16:3 says, “Commit your works unto the LORD, and your thoughts shall be established.”

Do It with Your Might

After evaluating the change and counting the cost, it is time to act! Start carrying out that solid plan. Do not allow procrastination or laziness to get in the way of success.

Solomon wrote, “Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work, nor device,

nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither you go” (Ecc. 9:10). Put all your might into accomplishing your chosen goal. The wise ancient king also reminds us that we only have a limited time to make changes.

Proverbs 10:4, also written by Solomon, says, “He becomes poor that deals with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” We have to be diligent. *Dictionary.com* defines this quality as “constant in effort to accomplish something; attentive and persistent in doing anything.”

Verses about being slothful—lazy—provide a cautionary tale of what *not* to do: “The slothful man says, There is a lion without, I shall be slain in the streets” (Prov. 22:13).

This individual does not accomplish what he set out to do. Instead, he makes excuses. If we are not careful, we could find ourselves justifying why we are not acting on our goals. While our excuses may not be as silly as claiming the king of the jungle is roaming through the neighborhood, be on guard and ready to cut through this kind of thinking.

Proverbs 26:14 adds more: “As the door turns upon [its] hinges, so does the slothful upon his bed.” A lazy person has lost sight of the changes he needs to make and has afforded himself too much time for rest and relaxation.

Instead, we should be “not slothful in business; fervent in spirit” (Rom. 12:11). Maintain your passion for why you made the goal in the first place and work hard to get it done.

Measure Progress

Another principle is found in I Timothy 4:15. Paul wrote: “Meditate upon these things; give yourself wholly to them; that your profiting may appear to all.”

As you carry out your plan over time, you should “meditate” on how you are doing. This religious-sounding word simply means to exercise controlled thought about something. Sit quietly and reflect on what you have accomplished. Do not be afraid to revise your plan or the goal itself if you need to.

The New King James Version renders the end of the verse this way: “that your *progress* may be evident to all.”

As we make life changes, especially if they involve establishing or eliminating a habit, we should not have an all or nothing mentality. *Progress* is required—small, incremental improvement over time.

If your goal is to get up earlier each morning, it may not be realistic to set your alarm to 5:30 a.m. instead of 8:00 a.m. on Day 1. It is better to work up to that goal, rolling back your wake-up time a few minutes each day.

If you want to learn public speaking, do not expect perfection on Day 1, or even Day 50. Simply getting through a speech of a few minutes and getting a point across is a great marker of progress.

As you move toward accomplishing your goal, be patient with yourself. Especially if what you are trying to work on is bigger or more deeply rooted, it takes hard work. If you slip up, recommit and keep pushing. Do not give up.

Proverbs 24:16 says, “A just man falls seven times, and rises up again: but the wicked shall fall into mischief.” The Hebrew word for “seven” can mean, by extension, an indefinite number of times. A man or woman who is really committed to change will not give up when they fall. They stay on their journey to growth.

A Different Kind of Change

The steps we examined—evaluate the change, prepare and count the cost, do it with your might, and measure progress—could be used for many goals in life. They are general principles from the Bible that you can apply for success. They will help you make positive changes in your life.

To learn more, read *Real Truth* Editor-in-Chief David C. Pack’s booklet *The Laws to Success* at rcg.org/tlts. It brings more practical knowledge from the Bible and Mr. Pack’s life and ministry that will help you succeed.

However, any article about God’s view of change would not be complete

without addressing a different kind of change. It goes far deeper than the New Year's resolutions people typically make. It is called repentance.

In Acts 2, the apostle Peter told the people: "...God has made that same Jesus, whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (vs. 36). This was a culmination of a sermon that started in verse 14. Peter told his listeners that they were responsible for Jesus' brutal beating and death.

The result? "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart [the Greek means pierced thoroughly or agitated violently], and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (vs. 37).

Here was Peter's answer: "*Repent*, and be baptized every one of you in the

name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (vs. 38).

The word "repent" here comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, conveying a complete change of mind and direction. Peter wanted his listeners to totally change their thinking and way of life.

This Greek word is used throughout the New Testament. Repentance is fundamental to becoming a Christian. Hebrews 6:1-2 says it is a foundational doctrine of Christ. It is no accident that Peter's words came on Pentecost, when the New Testament Church was being built. To be a Christian, a person must repent and be baptized.


It is admirable to want to do better in our health, finances, family relationships, hobbies and other areas. But

smaller improvements are not what matters most to God. He wants people to totally change their thinking and behavior—from going their own way to following His way of life.

Acts 3:19 adds more: "Repent you therefore, and *be converted*, that your sins may be blotted out."

The word converted here also signifies dramatic change. According to the *Outline of Biblical Usage*, it means to turn to the worship of the true God, to return, to bring back. To be converted involves totally changing the direction of your life.

The Bible has much more to say about repentance and conversion than we have space for. Read our booklet *What Is True Conversion?* at rcg.org/witc to learn more. □



The path to success doesn't have to be complicated...

Does achieving life goals seem distant, out of reach, IMPOSSIBLE? Most everyone has set out to accomplish their ambitions only to quickly slam into a brick wall of setbacks and difficulties.

It does not have to be this way! There are simple laws governing success. Order your free copy of *The Laws to Success* today at rcg.org/tlts.

Organized Crime Gangs Have Expanded into a Third of Cities in Brazil's Amazon

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) – Criminal gangs are operating in over a third of municipalities in Brazil's Amazon rainforest, driving a boom in violence, according to a new report published by a prominent nonprofit organization.

Gangs were present in 260 of 772 municipalities in the region, compared with 178 in 2023, according to the Brazilian Forum on Public Safety. The entrenchment of “mafia-like” organizations—particularly the Red Command and First Capital Command—“greatly aggravate the situation in the Legal Amazon, which is now seen as a very strategic territory for transnational trafficking, with the circulation of different illicit goods,” the report said.

The Legal Amazon is an area in nine states of Brazil that is home to

the largest hydrographic basin in the world.

Of the 260 municipalities where organized crime groups are present, Red Command controls fully half, up from one-fourth last year, forum president Renato Sergio de Lima told *The Associated Press*.

The fact that gangs are securing monopolies on criminal activities could help explain the 6.2 percent drop in violent deaths across the region from 2021 to 2023, authors wrote in the third edition of the report titled “Cartographies of Violence in the Amazon.”

However, “the internalization of violence to rural and forest areas has made small, quiet municipalities some of the most violent in the country,” they said.

The expansion of criminal organizations in the Amazon happened at the same time as the growth of illegal mining, Federal Police detective Alexandre Saraiva said, which sharply increased under former President Jair Bolsonaro, who encouraged the practice.

After defeating Mr. Bolsonaro in the 2022 election and returning to office for a third, non-consecutive term in January 2023, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has sought to tackle crime and deforestation in the region. While deforestation has decreased, the report shows his administration has had little success in reigning in the expansion of drug gangs.

“Today, might makes right in the Amazon,” Federal Police detective Alexandre Saraiva, who authored the book “Jungle: Loggers, Miners and Corruption in a Lawless Amazon,” said by phone from Rio. He said some Brazilian lawmakers and local politicians were also responsible for the situation and accused them of receiving funds from criminal groups in exchange for protection.

Brazil's Federal Police launched an operation in December against criminal organizations that transport gold illegally extracted from Indigenous lands. Officers carried out nine arrest warrants across six states and seized assets worth \$100 million, according to a statement. Over the course of a year-long investigation, groups transported approximately one ton of illegal gold and recruited foreigners on commercial flights to fly with gold in their baggage, police said.

The police operation is “an example of how the state can and should act,” Mr. Lima said. But tackling drug trafficking, environmental crimes, land-grabbing and other illegal actions also requires coordinated, multi-pronged public policies as well as local development projects, according to the report.

“There is no magic wand that is going to solve all the problems,” he said. □



Brazil Environmental Agency helicopters fly over an illegal mining camp during an operation to try to contain the practice in Yanomami Indigenous territory, Roraima state, Brazil (Feb. 11, 2023).

AP/EDMAR BARROS

Nigeria's Hunger Crisis Deepens with 33 Million at Risk, Report Says



Food supplies are pictured before a food aid distribution by volunteers of the Lagos food bank initiative in a community in Oworoshoki, Lagos, Nigeria (July 10, 2021).

REUTERS/TEMILADE ADELAJA

LAGOS (Reuters) – Nigeria faces one of its worst hunger crises with more than 30 million people expected to be food insecure in 2025, a one-third jump from 2024 due to economic hardship, a joint report by the government and United Nations said.

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, is grappling with a cost of living crisis that led to deadly protests in August.

Economic hardship has worsened after President Bola Tinubu started austerity reforms, including devaluing the naira and ending a decades-old petrol subsidy, fueling inflation.

The analysis, conducted twice a year in 26 states and the federal capital, projected that 33.1 million people would be food insecure by August

2025. That compares with 24.8 million by end of 2024.

"Several factors are driving this trend, but most prominently are economic hardship coupled with record high inflation, a record rise in food prices and record high transportation costs," a statement accompanying the report said.

Chi Lael, World Food Program spokesperson in Nigeria, told *Reuters* that "economic decisions to strengthen the country in the long term, in the short term have felt like a direct attack on people's wallets, hitting hardest every time they try to buy food."

Finance Minister Wale Edun said 5 million households had so far received cash handouts of 25,000 naira (\$15.45), as part of the govern-

ment's program to help the most vulnerable families.

High food prices have contributed the most to inflation, which advanced to 32.70 percent in annual terms in September from 32.15 percent in August.

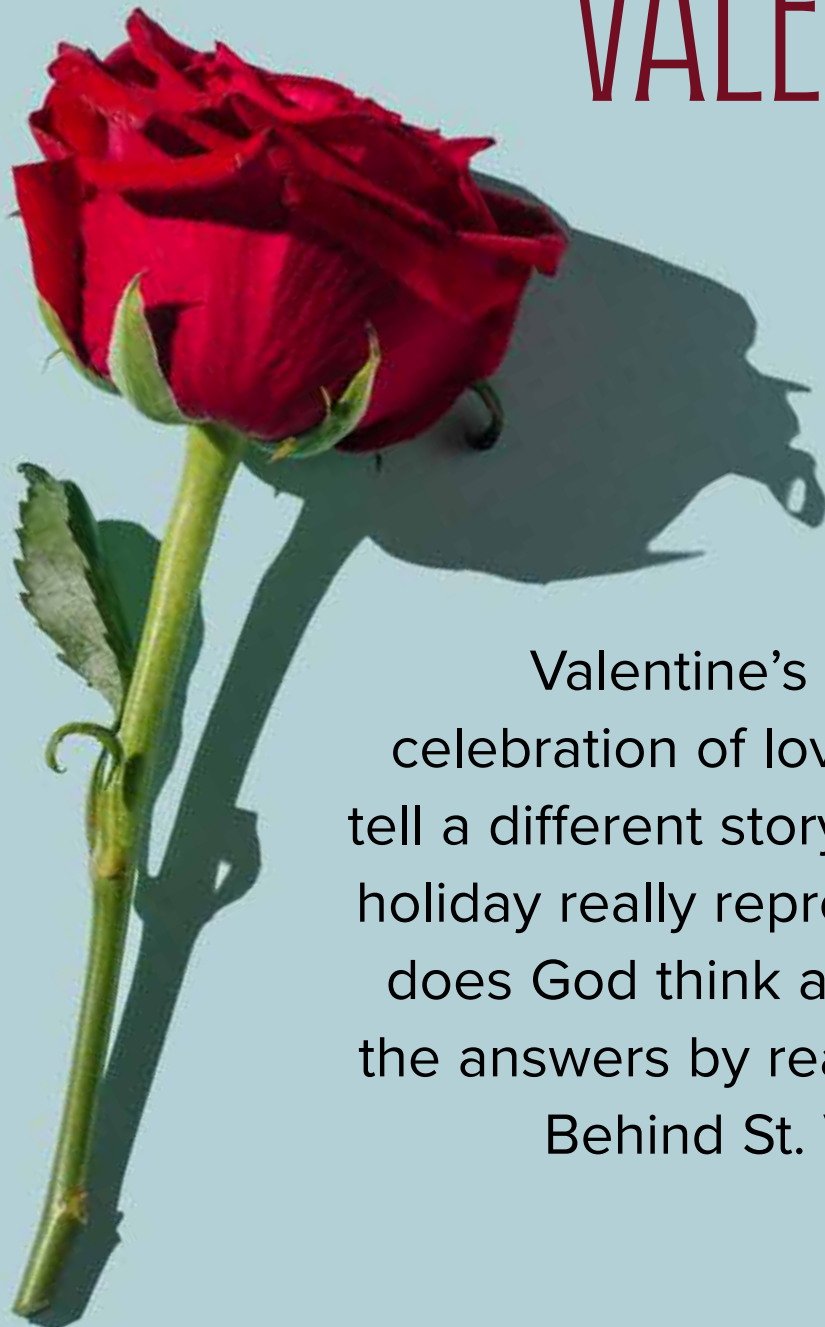
Flooding and insecurity in northern states continued to hit agriculture, further driving up food prices beyond the reach of many families.

The floods in late 2024 destroyed an estimated 1.6 million hectares of crops, mainly in the northern food basket states, potentially causing production losses of a combined 1.1 million tons for maize, sorghum and rice, the joint statement said.

That is enough to meet the daily food needs of about 13 million people for a year.

In financial terms, the potential cereal crop losses amount to almost \$1 billion in economic losses, the statement added. □

THE TRUTH ABOUT VALENTINE'S DAY



Valentine's Day is seen as a celebration of love, but its origins tell a different story. What does the holiday really represent—and what does God think about it? Find out the answers by reading "The Truth Behind St. Valentine's Day."

rcg.org/ttbsvd