



No 'Normal' Thanksgiving This Year, but Maybe in 2021

The Wired Word for the Week of November 22, 2020

In the News

Last week a second pharmaceutical company announced that its vaccine is showing great effectiveness against Covid-19 in testing. That company, Moderna, said its vaccine appears to be 94.5 percent effective, according to preliminary data from an ongoing study. A week before that, competitor Pfizer announced that its vaccine is showing a 90 percent effective rate in its clinical tests.

These announcements put both companies on track to seek permission from the FDA within weeks for emergency use of their vaccines in the United States.

While the likelihood of these vaccines being available soon has to be considered good news in the fight against the pandemic, they won't rescue this year's Thanksgiving gatherings from the kind of dampers many state governors and public health officials are recommending during this time when the virus is surging.

Because even asymptomatic people can spread the disease, many of those recommendations call for keeping holiday gatherings to 10 individuals or fewer and asking people not to travel. Some say it's best to limit attendance to members of your own household.

Obviously, the likelihood of an attendee carrying the virus into your gathering goes up significantly the more guests you have. For those wanting a localized risk assessment, there's a map developed by Georgia Tech researchers that allows you to zoom in on your area, choose the number of people you think will attend and learn the odds of at least one Covid-19 positive person being there, assuming those in attendance have the general probability of infection. See the map in the links list below.

Beyond this Thanksgiving, however, the vaccines offer hope of life eventually returning to "normal," but not as quickly as any of us would like.

"There is an end to this," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. But he and many other health officials say that in the meantime, it will require the public to continue wearing masks, maintaining distance from others, avoiding crowds and being willing to receive a vaccination against the virus.

"People shouldn't think of vaccines as the savior," said Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and a professor of vaccinology at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. "Vaccines are, along with hygienic measures, a way to get in control of this virus, but we need both."

"If you have a very, very highly effective vaccine and we convince most of the people in the country to take the vaccine, we could get back to a degree of normality maybe by the end of 2021," Fauci said.

By the end of 2021! We want normality sooner, but many projections say we need to be ready for a concerted effort over several more months.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[There May Be a Covid-19 Vaccine by the End of the Year, But 'Normality' May Not Come Until End of 2021. *USA Today*](#)

[Officials Issue a Blunt Message for Thanksgiving: Keep Your Gathering Small and Don't Travel. *NBC News*](#)

[2nd Virus Vaccine Shows Striking Success in US Tests. *AP News*](#)

[Covid-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning Tool. *Georgia Tech*](#)

Applying the News Story

Regarding this Thanksgiving -- and judging by what we hear from high-profile health officials -- it appears we're faced with the choice between risking our health and that of our family members or foregoing Thanksgiving gatherings altogether, and hoping for better choices when Thanksgiving 2021 comes around.

Does it strike you that there's something very biblical in those circumstances? Hope itself is a major theme in the scriptures; hope is a projection of our goals and desires into the future, trusting in God. Likewise, restoration is a biblical theme, which can include a return to normality or the way life was before the pandemic. Hope and restoration are the "tomorrow factor" in the Bible.

Tomorrow is the stuff of prophecy. "The days are coming when ..." proclaimed the prophets. Such prophecies were often uttered during dark and dismal days in Israel's history when not only the present but also the future looked bleak. But "tomorrow" was one way the prophets kept Israel's faith alive. In biblical terms, tomorrow -- the future, the time that has not yet arrived -- is the assurance that the present is never the end of the story. It proclaims that the darkness of today will not survive into tomorrow.

Tomorrow is one of the keys for understanding Christianity, too. We explain it something like this: When you embrace the way of Christ, you enter the kingdom of God, which is already here in some ways. But you also inherit the hope of the kingdom to come, where God's love and power will have full sway, where all wrongs will be righted and where there will be neither sorrow nor suffering anymore.

Thus hope and restoration -- the tomorrow factor -- are the topics of this discussion.

The Big Questions

1. For what are you thankful this year? What impact, if any, have the present circumstances, including not gathering for worship, had on your faith in God? Why? How does the Bible's "tomorrow factor" operate in your life today?
2. What to you is the most depressing thing for you about living through this pandemic? What, if anything, or who, if anyone, has helped you deal with any pandemic-related despair? What is the most hopeful thing about living through the pandemic?
3. What might be the first thing you will do when the "all clear" from the virus is given? What would a return to "normality" look like for you? Might there be a "new normal" for you? Why?
4. What accommodations have you had to make to continue on during the pandemic and which ones of those, if any, might you want to continue once the pandemic is behind us? Why?
5. How much of your hope for restoration of your pre-pandemic way of life is based on the availability of a vaccine? Explain.

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Joel 2:24-26

The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. ... (For context, read 2:12-27.)

Joel prophesied to the people of Judah during a locust plague, where a massive swarm of the insects devoured every scrap of vegetation from the fields and orchards, leaving the populace with little, and setting them back "years" in terms of their agriculture. Joel called the people to repentance (vv. 12-14) and even gave them a model prayer to pray (v. 17).

He also projected for the people how God was going to respond to their prayers, some of which is quoted in the verses above -- abundant grain, wine and oil for starters, but beyond that God would "repay" the people for the "years" the locusts had taken from them. The Hebrew word translated into English as "repay" is *shalem*, which is related to the more widely known *shalôm*, which means "peace." *Shalem* includes that concept, but adds the ideas of "completeness," "fulfillment" and "perfection." When applied to its use in the verses above, *shalem* denotes that forgiveness for the people's sin has been given -- in effect, God has paid off their unpaid obligation -- and wholeness is restored, which is a perfect state. "You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God," quoted above, describes that perfect state.

While the coronavirus plague is an unprecedented event in our lifetime and a tragedy for many, the idea that we have to wait until sometime in the future for the restoration of "normality" puts us in a predicament not unlike that of Joel and his fellow Judahites facing the tragic results of the locust plague. For them, there was great promise in God's response to their prayer; for us there is great promise in the vaccines we hope will soon be available. But just as the Judahites had to

project these promises into the future, so do we with the promises of vaccine rescue. The Judahites' restoration wasn't going to happen overnight, and neither is ours.

But that's the nature of hope: It is always looking forward, and it's doing so in the conviction that our lives are in God's hands.

TWW team member Frank Ramirez comments on this text from Joel: "We are so used to thinking as individuals. The idea of having everything restored may not have been true for every individual but for the community, restoration is certain. There's no question that those who have lost family and friends to the virus will not have those people restored. Businesses may not reopen. Those whose response has been uncivil may not find their relationships restored -- at least not immediately.

"But our grandchildren may live in a better world. Business may get better. Family becomes dearer as do reunions. It's a lot like the clause in the commandment about honoring your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land God is giving you. We may individually care for our parents, but our lives personally may be short. However, the people who care for the most vulnerable are creating a sane and stable society, one that has security. That's the restoration we may hope for."

Questions: Why didn't God "repay" the people of Judah right away? Why doesn't he do that for us regarding restoration to normality? What is your response to Frank Ramirez's remarks?

Matthew 6:10

Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (For context, read 6:5-15.)

This line from the Lord's Prayer might be called the ultimate in hope, where we project the restoration of all things into the future beyond time.

Restoration means returning something to a previous state or condition. In the biblical view, the kingdom of God is a restoration to the state where everyone lives as God intended, the state that is represented biblically by the Garden of Eden,

Questions: What does the kingdom of God mean to you? What sort of restoration of things important to you are you expecting when it comes? Is God's will to be found in the pandemic, or in our response to the pandemic, or not in the pandemic at all? Explain your reasoning.

John 1:20

... I am not the Messiah. (For context, read 1:19-28.)

John the Baptist made this statement when some priests and Levites, after hearing his preaching, quizzed him about his identity. He made clear he was not the long-expected Messiah, but was rather "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'"

The fact that people thought John *might* be the Messiah, however, highlights the belief prevalent in the Judaism of that time, which started centuries before, that a savior was coming to restore

Israel to independence and peace. The expectation of a Messiah was a hope projected into the future.

Questions: As the New Testament tells us, Jesus was the Messiah. But why, do you think, some of his contemporaries had difficulty accepting him as such?

What should we make of Dr. Paul Offit's remark that "People shouldn't think of vaccines as the savior"?

Zechariah 8:3-6

Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. ... Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. ... Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days, should it also seem impossible to me, says the LORD of hosts? (For context, read 8:1-8.)

This is the Lord speaking through the prophet Zechariah to the "remnant," the Jews who had survived the Babylonian exile and had now returned to their homeland -- but only to find the cities destroyed, the temple gone, the fields uncultivated and other peoples, who did not welcome their return, living where their homes had once been.

To them God promised restoration where it would be safe for the elderly to "again sit in the streets of Jerusalem," streets "full of boys and girls playing ..." When would all this come to pass? It's not specified in the prophecy, and it wasn't going to happen quickly or without their hard work and cooperation, but Zechariah voiced the vision and the people had what the prophet described to look forward to.

Questions: Zechariah's prophecy might be described using the modern term "vision casting." What is the value of such visions when the fulfillment is likely to be a long way off? When has a vision kept you going despite difficulties? What motivation, if any, did a vision or dream provide you over a long haul?

For Further Discussion

1. Consider England during the dark days of World War II, especially early in the war when the country was ill prepared to fight. Night after night, Nazi warplanes bombed London. Many of London's children were sent to live with relatives out in the countryside, and people in the city lived with blackout conditions at night, sometimes running for air-raid shelters. And night after night, British flyers, seriously outgunned, took to the air to try and defend the country. Many did not return alive.

In the midst of all that, a song was written: "The White Cliffs of Dover." Listen to it [here](#) and discuss how tomorrow functions in the song.

2. Respond to this, heard in a sermon: "When Christians work at helping others, we can call that 'finding tomorrow.' That has a counterpart in Judaism called *tikkun olam*, a Hebrew phrase

meaning 'repairing the world.' One part of the concept is focused on Jews themselves, with the idea that they should form their own community as a model for the world of how God wants people to live together. But the other part is outward-looking. It means they aren't responsible only for creating a model society among themselves but also have some responsibility for the whole society's welfare.

"*Tikkun olam* and 'finding tomorrow' aren't about good works or advocacy by themselves. Rather, they're about employing those things in balance with meeting people's spiritual needs. We cannot repair the world just by securing economic well-being and equal rights for everyone; we also need to assist people in finding God.

"The kingdom of God is the ultimate tomorrow. It's the goal of history and the reward of the faithful. Its coming is up to God. But between today and that tomorrow are the nearer tomorrows. We who follow Jesus have the duty to make sure that society's benefits are open for all for those tomorrows and that the path to spiritual fulfillment is well marked.

"And we shouldn't wait for tomorrow to get started. We can get there from here."

3. Reflect on this from TWW consultant James Gruetzner, and discuss the phrase "safety third." Emergency response personnel have long used the phrase "Safety Third" (as in "safety is the third consideration") in reference to their jobs. This phrase has become well known through Mike Rowe, host of the series *Dirty Jobs* and *Somebody's Gotta Do It*. It reflects the fact that nothing is perfectly safe, but people make trade-offs between the probability of costs (risks) and the probability of gain (benefits). A common example is driving a car: Most people consider the benefits of driving to a given destination to outweigh the risk of an auto accident. Safety is a major consideration, but it is not primary. If personal safety were the only consideration, no emergency medical personnel would go to help a person in a crashed vehicle on a busy highway -- much less ride in an ambulance to get there!

What, then, are first and second? Sometimes the terms "mission" and "heart" are used for the first and second considerations. "Mission" means that the task or operation must have a goal that is worthwhile. "Heart" refers to the attitude and internal joy a person gets -- and reflects the interplay between the desired goal (benefits) and the risks involved (safety).

The idea of Safety Third reflects how most people view the things they do in their lives. It also reflects how God dealt with us. Jesus did not consider his own safety as something to cling to, but instead chose death on a cross in order to achieve his mission of restoring our relationship with God. He was not disheartened, but carried on to the end -- to our benefit.

4. Discuss this: Regarding the choice between risking health at a Thanksgiving gathering and having no gathering at all, TWW consultant James Gruetzner, who works in the scientific community, says, "Really that is the choice every year, even though we generally haven't acknowledged it. Any gathering runs a definite risk of spreading infectious disease, and this novel coronavirus isn't any different. Its morbidity isn't much greater than other diseases, but we have now been made aware of -- or even made scared of -- its effects."

TWW team member Stan Purdum adds to this that since the Covid-19 restrictions have been put in place, he, who usually has one or two colds every year, has had none at all, which perhaps adds anecdotal confirmation to Gruetzner's comment that every gathering runs a risk of spreading infectious disease.

Responding to the News

This is a good time to be diligent in wearing a mask and maintaining a social distance of six feet. While the increased social distance benefits all concerned, whatever benefits coming from mask wearing mostly accrue to others, while the wearer puts up with the disadvantages. Thus mask wearing may be a sign of caring for others, and their mask wearing a sign of caring for us.

Prayer

Lord of yesterday, today and tomorrow, let our hopes for better circumstances ahead prod us to do what we can to help others get through today's difficulties. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

Town Struggles to Find Motivation to Rebuild After Twin Hurricanes

The Wired Word for the Week of November 22, 2020

In the News

Kathryn Shea Duncan, whose job it is to promote Lake Charles, Louisiana, loved going to work every day. Her working-class town had a lot going for it. Then the Covid-19 outbreak last winter interrupted many of the recreational and educational activities in the region.

August 27, Hurricane Laura, a category 4 storm, slammed the community, displacing more than 6,000 of the town's 80,000 residents and causing an estimated \$14 billion in damages. Thousands were without power for weeks. Just as some were beginning to make progress with repairs, Hurricane Delta made landfall October 9, causing another \$2 billion in damages.

Some churches, businesses and homeowners had replaced damaged roofs blown off by Laura only to lose the new roofs to Delta. Duncan, 24, began to wonder what was left of her community that she could publicize.

"The reality is, what product do we have to pitch?" she said. "What event? What's open? ... You start thinking, what does your job look like?" Duncan said. "What is everything that I do for a living, promote for a living, going to look like?"

"The whole country's burdened right now with politics and Covid and all the uncertainties about the economy. And on top of all that, these folks get hit, and then hit again," said Kyle Kelley, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Louisiana.

The hurricanes couldn't have come at a worse time for election officials, who had to move nearly 70 percent of 123 voting precincts in the Lake Charles area to other locations for the presidential election due to problems related to the storms.

"This is going to go down as one of the most challenging elections in our history," Lynn Jones, the Calcasieu Parish Clerk of Court, said. "It was a one, two, three punch. The second we were done making modifications for Covid, Laura hits, and then comes Delta."

Danny Bartie Jr., whose diner was damaged during the storms, said, "For a lot of [the residents], voting is the last thing on their mind. They are dealing with so much else. A lot of people can't get to the polls, they don't have vehicles or they have been displaced."

The National Baptist Convention of America president, Samuel Tolbert Jr., who also pastors Greater St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church in Lake Charles, said, "The actual recovery -- putting things back together -- is almost at a standstill. People are waiting for insurance, or assurance from God, on what steps to take next."

Duncan, along with many Lake Charles residents, was discouraged, frustrated and angry that they couldn't seem to catch a break. She was really tempted by the thought of moving away.

But as she saw neighbors pulling together to make the best of a horrible situation, and checking on each other even as they struggled with the chaos in their own lives, Duncan pivoted to her default optimism.

"We can make it better," she said. "Through economic development and improving our infrastructure, and having a cleaner environment, and better transportation. You can't do all of those big things if you don't stay and work at it day by day."

Somehow, she thought that if she did move to a big city, her contributions would probably get lost in the shuffle.

"But if I stay here," the public relations coordinator said, "I can make a difference."

The chance to make a difference motivated a team of 26 people from HillSpring Church in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, to join a relief mission to Lake Charles, to aid in the recovery effort. Half of the team were teenagers.

"Our goal and our hope is that students would make a difference, not just in their neighborhood, but the world around them" said Associate Pastor Matt Barnett. "They went out and really saw the world outside of themselves, saw the devastation, saw pain, saw hopelessness, and they got to bring just a little bit of hope to each of these families."

Jacob Dennis, one of the volunteers, remarked, "It was just good to go out and help them -- bring a little light into their world in a dark time."

While Lake Charles had suffered many losses, Duncan said, "There's sort of this unfortunate beauty that might come from this. ... maybe [the people of Lake Charles] have an opportunity to reinvent themselves."

"By staying, I'm constantly challenging myself," the young woman noted. "It's that constant, daily challenge of thinking, what can I do better? How can I make this place better? How can I leave it better for the next generation?"

And besides, Duncan commented, "If I leave, then who is going to stay? Who is going to be that person?"

More on this story can be found at these links:

[How Do You Advertise a Town Ravaged by Hurricanes? *The New York Times*](#)
[In Lake Charles: Help Needed After Two Hurricanes in Six Weeks. *Baptist News*](#)
['One, Two, Three Punch': Back-to-back Hurricanes and Covid-19 Complicate Voting in Lake Charles. *Tennessean*](#)
[After Two Devastating Hurricanes, Southwest Louisiana Worries the Rest of the Country Has Already Moved On. *Scalawag Magazine*](#)
[HillSpring Church Provides Hurricane Relief in Lake Charles, Louisiana. *Sandite Pride News*](#)

Applying the News Story

The struggle of the people in Lake Charles, Louisiana, may serve as a microcosm for our nation and our world in the year 2020. Just when we think things couldn't possibly get any worse, another catastrophe happens!

We note that as this lesson was in development, a similar tragedy was unfolding as never before in Nicaragua. Two hurricanes, Eta and Iota, one a Category 4, the next a Category 5, struck two weeks and 16 miles apart, in a region far less equipped than our own to deal with them and to recover.

TWW team member Jim Berger observed: "This has never happened before, in two nations, two months apart! But the second time it's not America, so it's not our concern? Many faith-based disaster relief agencies are trying to respond, but all are stretched to the limit, especially during the pandemic. Every year churches send mission teams to Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala. Are we ready to send those same volunteers into post-apocalyptic disasters?"

Where can we find hope and motivation in times like these? We look to our faith for answers.

The Big Questions

1. When, if ever, have you been tempted to "move away" from the life you were living? What stresses and pressures contributed to your feelings of frustration with the way things were?
2. When, if ever, have you attempted to repair what was broken in your life, only to have those repairs destroyed by another "storm"? How did you react?
3. Where do you turn when you can't seem to make any significant progress dealing with recalcitrant, stubborn problems?

4. Who or what has made a difference in your life when you needed encouragement? How did that person or thing renew your hope?

5. How can our faith help us discover or create "unfortunate beauty" from devastation and loss?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Nehemiah 2:17-20

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, "What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem." (For context, read 2:1-20.)

After learning that Jerusalem, the city where his ancestors were buried, lay in waste, its gates destroyed by fire, Nehemiah couldn't hide his distress from King Artaxerxes of Persia, whom he served as cupbearer (vv. 1-3). When the king inquired what Nehemiah wanted, he asked to be sent Judah to rebuild Jerusalem (vv. 4-6). He also asked Artaxerxes to use his influence with his subordinates, to guarantee Nehemiah safe passage through their territories and to provide the resources and materials that would be needed for the building project. The king granted his request, and also sent army and cavalry officers with Nehemiah (vv. 7-9).

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah conducted a clandestine inspection of the walls and gates of the city (vv. 11-16). Then he spoke to the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials and "the rest that were to do the work" (v. 16). We don't know if those workers were Jews, or perhaps some people of other ancestry and nationality.

Questions: Why do you suppose the people had not rebuilt the walls or repaired the gates of the city before Nehemiah's arrival?

What points (positive and negative) did Nehemiah make that motivated the people to join the reconstruction effort?

Isaiah 61:1-4

*The spirit of the LORD God is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,*

*and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion --
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations. (No context needed.)*

The person speaking in this passage, upon whom the spirit and anointing of the Lord God rests, is the messianic servant of the Lord mentioned in Isaiah 42, 49-50, and 52-53. Jesus quoted from this passage in Luke 4:18-21, essentially saying that he is the one who fulfills this prophecy. As God's anointed one (which is the meaning of "Messiah" and "Christ"), Jesus was commissioned to deliver God's good news of liberation from the oppressor, the healing of grief, the end of captivity, the return of joy, praise and celebration.

The last verse in this passage is of particular interest to the news about Lake Charles. While that town was devastated by natural disasters, and Jerusalem was burned to the ground by the Babylonians, the impact on the residents of both cities must have been similar. Just as the Jews must have wondered whether they could ever recover and rise from the ruins, those suffering loss in Louisiana after the hurricanes, and people across the country and around the world who have lost loved ones and livelihoods during the pandemic may likewise question whether their broken hearts and fractured lives can ever be repaired.

The servant of the Lord starts by declaring that he has been sent to bind up the brokenhearted. He begins the process of healing what is broken, but the process doesn't end with his work and effort. By the end of the passage, the pronouns shift from singular to plural, so "they" will display the glory of the Lord, "they" shall build up the ancient ruins, "they" shall raise up the former devastations, "they" shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Questions: To whom is the servant of the Lord referring in verses 3-4? What is the significance of the fact that it is these particular people who will raise their ruined cities and lives from the ashes?

What is it that empowers people to overcome past injustices and trauma, so that they don't repeat destructive patterns, but become creators of beauty, strength and joy, and builders of courage, character and community instead?

Ezekiel 36:8-12

But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot out your branches, and yield your fruit to my people Israel; for they shall soon come home. See now, I am for you; I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown; and I will multiply your population, the whole house of Israel, all of it; the

towns shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt; and I will multiply human beings and animals upon you. They shall increase and be fruitful; and I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times, and will do more good to you than ever before. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. I will lead people upon you -- my people Israel -- and they shall possess you, and you shall be their inheritance. No longer shall you bereave them of children. ... (For context, read 36:8-12, 33-38.)

In the preceding chapter, Ezekiel prophesied about God's judgment upon Israel's enemies, represented by Edom's Mount Seir. In this chapter, the prophet pronounced God's blessing on Israel, represented by Israel's mountains. This blessing was to come in the regeneration of the land, the return of the exiles from Babylon to Israel, and the spiritual renewal of the heart of the people (vv. 25-34).

Here God shows concern for the environment, speaking directly to the mountains, pledging that they will be cared for, populated with people and animals, and fruitful. Instead of a polluted landscape capable of killing their children, the land would be nourishing, a valuable inheritance.

God promised that one day God would cleanse the people of Israel from all their sins, rebuild their waste places, and bring the people who had been scattered back to their homeland to rebuild, fortify and fill ruined towns with "flocks of people." The empty, desolate land would become like the Garden of Eden, pulsing with new life. The transformation would prove to observers that the Lord is God (vv. 33-38).

Questions: Is it appropriate to apply the promises in this passage to the current nation of Israel? If not, why not? If so, how might they apply?

Is it appropriate to apply the promises in this passage more broadly, to any other people groups or nations? If not, why not? If so, how might they apply to the people of Lake Charles, for example?

What biblical interpretation principles should be observed when seeking to understand the meaning and relevance of such a prophecy to our own situation?

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

2 Corinthians 5:1

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (For context, read 4:16-18, 5:1-10.)

In 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, Paul emphasized that any power visible in his life belonged to God and not to himself or his coworkers. As if to underline the point, he wrote how they were "afflicted in every way, ... perplexed, ... persecuted, ... struck down," yet they were "not crushed, [nor] ... driven to despair, ... not forsaken ... [nor] destroyed."

Paul gave the reason for their hope in 4:13-14: the assurance that God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus. Even when faced with physical decline and death (our outer nature wasting away), we can be spiritually renewed (in our inner nature) every day (5:1). Even in the most difficult of circumstances (and Paul experienced many severe difficulties, as we can see from 2 Corinthians 11:23-28), Paul viewed them as "temporary," "slight" and "momentary," compared to the "eternal weight of glory beyond all measure" yet to come.

Then Paul uses the image of an earthly tent as a metaphor for the human body, which is subject to corruption and death. As hard as it is to face our own mortality, ultimately we are assured that "we have a building from God ... eternal in the heavens."

We might lose our physical body to disease or accident or a violent act against our person; we may lose our earthly home for one reason or another, to fire, flood, dry rot, hurricane, foreclosure, etc., but the building God is erecting is not made with human hands, and we, God's people, are the living stones being built into that eternal house, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone and foundation (1 Corinthians 3:9-11; 1 Peter 2:4-6).

Question: Passages like this may sound like platitudes or "pie-in-the-sky" when you are going through difficulties and trauma. How might reflecting on the difficulties Paul faced before he wrote this letter help you draw on such a passage for strength, courage and hope?

For Further Discussion

1. After World War II, much of Europe, to say nothing of other parts of the world, lay in ruins. The United States responded to Europe's devastation with the [Marshall Plan](#). Was that simply a realistic political response to show the world that the United States was now the major world power, a political effort for the United States to quickly build up the economies of its nascent allies, or was it just the right thing to do? Or a combination? And, if a combination, when are mixed motives moral?
2. As we think about rebuilding storm-torn cities as well as other rebuilding projects, what lessons can the failures of [the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster response](#) teach us about finishing the rebuilding job thoroughly?
3. How do we not grow weary of helping those in great need, when everywhere we look, in a pandemic, we see people in peril?
4. This article, ["Small Missouri Village Moved to Uphill Site After 1993 Flood,"](#) about another community inundated with repeated flooding, reveals that there isn't a "one-size-fits-all" solution to difficulties affecting all inhabitants.

For the small village of Rhineland, Missouri (population 150), the devastating flood of 1993 was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Rather than repair their homes and businesses on the floodplain where they were located one more time, the residents decided to purchase a 40-acre plot of land on higher ground and move the entire town out of danger.

The Rhinelanders made the move with some help from governmental and non-governmental agencies, and by helping one another with transportation, procurement of food and

supplies, repairs and other needs as best they could. They put up with hardship and inconveniences, toughing it out and roughing it, gradually adjusting to their new neighborhoods.

While they miss some aspects of their old location, overall, they are glad they made the move, especially when the Missouri River overflows its banks. And they are thankful that, for the most part, they were able to keep the community together.

What is the most consequential decision your community has faced in its history? How did you navigate the challenges you were dealing with at the time? What strategies were helpful, and which were less so?

Responding to the News

1. Check with your church or denominational leadership about concrete ways you can further relief efforts for the people affected by hurricanes in Central America and the Gulf Coast, particularly during the pandemic. Formulate a plan of action for your group, and implement your plan.
2. You may wish to sing or listen to [The Church's One Foundation](#), [How Firm a Foundation](#), or [The Solid Rock \(My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less\)](#), as you reflect on the firm basis of our faith.

Prayer Suggested by Hebrews 11:10; Acts 20:32; 1 Corinthians 3:9-11; Isaiah 49:14-23

O God, the architect and builder of the city that has eternal foundations, build us up by the message of your grace, that we may be strong to weather any storm and its aftermath. Show us that Jesus is the solid foundation upon whom our life may be built. When we feel desolate and devastated, laid waste and destroyed, show us that you have not forsaken nor forgotten us. Show us the scars on the palms of your hands, Lord Jesus, that we may be reminded of your love for us. As we wait for you, by your Spirit bring new life to the land, that we may know that you are the Lord. Amen.