

Half-full or Hopeful?

Five reasons
for optimism in a
pessimistic day.

by Jim Denison

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*“No Christian can be a pessimist,
for Christianity is a system of
radical optimism.”*

William Ralph Inge

Americans are famously optimistic people. Now there's research to support our reputation.

In a recent survey, only four percent of Americans said they were pessimists. The rest said they were optimists (fifty percent), somewhere in-between (forty-three percent), or didn't know (three percent).

Why are we so optimistic?

Many of us are "glass half-full" people. We choose to see the world in positive ways. However, our optimism is based more on our attitude than actual evidence.

Christians have better cause for optimism. God's word describes our faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). According to Scripture, our hope is based not on our attitude but on God's actions and character. We are people of "radical optimism" because of our radical faith in a God whose love and power give us rock-solid reasons for hope.

You and I live in a time when we need such hope more than ever. In discouraging days, God's work in the world provides reasons for faith-filled optimism. Such hope is a powerful witness to a pessimistic culture.

Reasons for pessimism

According to a recent survey, only twenty-six percent of voters think America is on the right track. Only thirty-six percent of us approve of the job Congress is doing. Only twenty-five percent of registered voters believe their children will be better off than they are.

Sixty percent of voters say they cannot imagine supporting either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump for president. Many who support one of the candidates say they do so primarily because they dislike the other candidate.

Terrorism makes the news daily. After the Orlando massacre, newspaper carried articles with titles like, "A gunman opens fire in your building. What do you do?" That same week, the CIA Director testified before Congress that despite recent progress against ISIS, "our efforts have not reduced the group's terrorism capability and global reach."

Meanwhile, authorities warn that Mexican drug cartels are a greater threat to Americans than jihadists. By some estimates, drug-related homicides in the U.S. from 2006 to 2010 outnumbered Americans killed in Iraq and Afghanistan during the same time. Meanwhile, the death toll from drug overdoses in 2014 (the latest year on record) was 47,055 Americans, or approximately 125 people a day.

Moral issues continue to cloud the future. In 1996, just twenty-seven percent of Americans told Gallup that same-sex marriage should be valid; today that number has doubled to fifty-five percent. As Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg noted, "The change in people's attitudes on that issue has been enormous."

Now that same-sex marriage is legal, a focused effort is being waged to legalize polygamy. Euthanasia is legal in more states than ever. The California legislature is considering a bill that would remove government funding for any religious school that affirms biblical morality with regard to homosexuality, since such a stance is considered to "discriminate" against LGBTQ people. Only seminaries (so far) would be exempt.

Only thirty-five percent of Americans believe that moral truth is absolute. The vast majority are convinced that truth is what we believe it to be. As a result, tolerance is the guiding principle of our day, whether the issue is same-sex marriage, transgender bathrooms, euthanasia, or another moral issue.

Moral relativism is affecting Christians as well as the larger culture. Rod Dreher, one of my favorite cultural analysts, claims that “moralistic therapeutic deism” (MTD) is replacing biblical Christianity across our society and even in our churches. MTD can be summarized as: God exists, and he wants us to be nice to each other, and to be happy and successful.

Dreher concludes: “If by ‘Christianity’ we mean the philosophical and cultural framework setting the broad terms for engagement in American public life, Christianity is dead, and we Christians have killed it. We have allowed our children to be catechized by the culture and have produced an anesthetizing religion suited for little more than being a chaplaincy to the liberal individualist order.”

The power of optimism

Despite all that is going wrong in our culture, optimism is as necessary as ever. In fact, the more discouraging our days, the more we need to approach them with hope. William James noted that “pessimism leads to weakness, optimism to power.” Colin Powell believed that “perpetual optimism is a force multiplier.”

Optimism is especially important in this political season filled with negativity. As we will see, Christians are called to speak respectfully of others, to offer joy in Jesus, and to be the light in a dark world (Matthew 5:14–16). The coming months will provide abundant opportunity to witness to the hope that is ours in Christ.

God’s word calls us to “rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (Romans 12:12). Our Lord promises that “surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off” (Proverbs 23:18). We are taught that “the hope of the righteous brings joy” (Proverbs 10:28). The psalmist testified, “I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more” (Psalm 71:14).

So, why be optimistic in a pessimistic day? Consider five facts, each good news for the people of God.

Fact #1:

God is working around the world

There have been four spiritual awakenings in recent centuries. Now we are seeing a fifth Great Awakening around the world, today. Let's remember what God has done as historical context for what he is doing right now.

The **First Great Awakening** began in 1734.

The crisis in the colonies was severe. Moral conditions were dire. Not one in twenty people claimed to be a Christian. But Theodore Frelinghuysen, a Dutch Reformed minister who had come to the colonies from Holland in 1720, would not give up on his adopted homeland. He began praying fervently for revival to come to the colonies, first with himself and his church, and then with his larger community. Others began joining his fledgling prayer movement. The Spirit began to move.

Under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, the First Great Awakening began. As much as eighty percent of the colonial population became identified with a Christian church. It started with a

group who prayed for the power of God to extend the Kingdom of God in their Jerusalem and around the world.

The **Second Great Awakening** began in 1792.

After the War for Independence, social conditions grew even more deplorable than before. Drunkenness became epidemic; out of a population of five million, 300,000 were confirmed alcoholics; 15,000 died of the disease each year. Women were afraid to go out at night for fear of assault. Bank robberies were a daily occurrence.

A poll taken at Harvard University found not a single believer. Two were found at Princeton. Tom Paine claimed that "Christianity will be forgotten in thirty years."

But he was mistaken. In 1784, a Baptist pastor named Isaac Baccus gathered a number of ministers. They wrote a circular letter, asking believers to pray for awakening. Prayer groups spread all over New England. In 1792, revival broke out on college campuses, where hundreds were converted. "Camp meetings" spread across the frontier; eventually more than a thousand were meeting annually. Churches doubled and tripled in membership. One Baptist church in Kentucky with a membership of 170 baptized 421 during a single revival meeting.

In that year, William Carey began the modern missions movement. The American Bible Society, American Tract Society, and a variety of missions organizations were influenced by this Awakening. All because a group prayed for the power of God to extend the Kingdom of God in their Jerusalem and around the world.

The **Third Great Awakening** began in 1858.

The Gold Rush of 1848 had led to a booming economy which crashed in 1857. If it were not for the Great Depression of the 1930s, the collapse of 1857 would have that title. Fear of civil war was increasing. Turmoil was everywhere.

In the midst of such fear and anxiety, a group of laymen began meeting for prayer on Wednesday, September 23, 1857 at the Old North Dutch Church in New York City. They were led by a Presbyterian businessman named Jeremiah Lamphier. The first day, six people came to his prayer

meeting. The next week there were fourteen; then twenty-three; then the group began to meet daily. They outgrew the church and began filling other churches and meeting halls throughout the city. Such meetings spread across the country.

The result was one of the most significant movements in Christian history. More than a million were saved in one year, out of a national population of only thirty million. 50,000 were coming to Christ every week. The revival continued into the Civil War, where more than 100,000 soldiers were converted. It all happened because a group prayed for the power of God to extend the Kingdom of God in their Jerusalem and around the world.

The **Fourth Great Awakening** began in 1904.

This movement was birthed in the heart of a Welsh coal miner named Evan Roberts. He was convicted of his sins by the Spirit, and turned to God in prayer and repentance. He then began preaching to the young people in his church, calling them to prayer and repentance.

Prayer meetings broke out all over Wales. Social conditions were affected dramatically. Tavern owners went bankrupt; police formed gospel quartets because they had no one to arrest. Coal mines shut down for a time because the miners stopped using profanity and the mules no longer understood them.

The revival spread to America, where ministers in Atlantic City, New Jersey reported that out of 50,000 people, only fifty adults were left unconverted. In Portland, Oregon, more than 200 stores closed daily from eleven AM to two PM so people could attend prayer meetings. In 1896, only 2,000 students were engaged in missionary studies; by 1906, 11,000 were enrolled. All because a group prayed for the power of God to extend the Kingdom of God in their Jerusalem and around the world.

Now a **Fifth Great Awakening** is sweeping the world. David Barrett's *World Christian Encyclopedia* documents 82,000 conversions a day, the highest number in history. Other scholars estimate the number to be even higher, perhaps a million converts a week.

Consider some examples of God at work in the world today:

China

China was once the most secular nation in the world. However, scholars conservatively estimate that today the People's Republic of China (PRC) is home to between sixty-seven and one hundred million Christians in China. (Compare that number to the eighty-seven million Communist Party members.) One scholar believes that China will be home to 250 million Christians by 2030. At this rate, the PRC will soon become the world's largest Christian nation. By 2050, Christians could be 66.7 percent of the total Chinese population.

Missionaries I met in Beijing believe the number of true believers in China to be much higher than official estimates. The "underground" church by definition cannot be documented. Yet observers believe it is much larger than the state-recognized church. In fact, I was told that 100,000 people come to Christ every day in the PRC.

One reason is that Chinese intellectuals view their cultural religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism) as looking backwards rather than forwards. They want to integrate their religion with the twenty-first century technological future. They are attracted to the intellectualism inherent in vibrant biblical faith and are turning to Christ in record numbers.

South Korea

There was not a single born-again Christian on the Korean peninsula a century ago. Today, South Korea is one-third evangelical Christian, a population that outnumbers Buddhism. Five of the ten largest churches on earth are in South Korea; one of them has nearly a million members.

Brazil

Brazil is the world's largest Catholic nation. But evangelicals are growing in staggering numbers, rising from five percent to twenty-two percent of the population over the last forty years. By 2020, it is estimated that the country will be one-half evangelical Christian.

Cuba

The church is growing so quickly in Cuba that *Christianity Today* recently labeled the movement, "the Cuban revival." I have visited Cuba eight times and rejoice at the vitality of the church there. Leaders have told me that more than a million Cubans have come to Christ in just the last decade.

The Internet

In addition, the Holy Spirit is using the Internet to advance the global Kingdom. So-called "cybermissions" are reaching people in countries where missionaries are not permitted to work or even live. Online ministries are penetrating across Europe and into secular nations such as Japan. And they are reaching Muslims around the world.

One example is Global Media Outreach (GMO), a ministry that has shared the gospel more than 1.5 billion times and registered more than 167 million indicated decisions for Christ in the last twelve years. They are reaching thousands of Muslims every day with the good news of God's love. The Holy Spirit is using GMO and other ministries to take the gospel across the Internet and into hearts around the world.

In total, the countries where Christianity is growing the fastest might surprise you:

1. Nepal (10.93%)
2. China (10.86%)
3. United Arab Emirates (9.34%)
4. Saudi Arabia (9.27%)
5. Qatar (7.81%)
6. Oman (7.62%)
7. Yemen (7.09%)
8. Mongolia (5.96%)
9. Cambodia (5.87%)
10. Bahrain (5.49%).

The miraculous work of God in the nations is great cause for optimism in a pessimistic day.

Fact #2:

God is at work in the Muslim world

The Islamic State continues to spread terror around the world. The Orlando shooting and the San Bernardino massacre were both perpetrated by people living in America who pledged loyalty to ISIS.

The group continues to expand its reach. ISIS has inspired or directed attacks in twenty countries around the world. It has declared provinces in ten countries, with affiliates in another thirty-three countries.

But there is much good news in the news.

Missionaries to the Muslim world tell me that the atrocities of ISIS are causing multiplied thousands of Muslims to question their faith. More are turning to Christ than every before. This movement is just part of a global phenomenon sweeping the Muslim world.

Muslim authorities in Indonesia are warning that two million Muslims in their country convert to Christianity every year. At this rate, the world's largest Muslim nation will be mostly Christian by 2035.

Over six million Muslims in Africa convert to Christianity every year. Meanwhile, the fastest-growing Christian population on earth is in Iran. As many as one million Iranians have made Christ their Lord, many worshipping in secret.

And Muslim refugees in Europe are coming to Christ in record numbers. One church in Germany has seen 1,200 Muslims come to Christ in just three years. Tens of thousands of Muslims now in Europe are finding the hope of Christ. Critics claim that they are professing Christ to enhance their chances of receiving asylum, but the opposite is actually the case. Authorities distrust swift conversions; if they are sent home, their new faith may cost them their lives.

More Muslims around the world have become Christians in the last fifteen years than in the previous fifteen centuries. Missionary David Garrison believes that between two and seven million former Muslims have come to Christ just in the last two decades. Many are finding Christ through visions and dreams, a phenomenon missionary Tom Doyle documents in his excellent *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?*

The fact that God is moving so miraculously in the Muslim world is great cause for optimism in a pessimistic day.

Fact #3:

God is working in America

Conventional wisdom claims that religion is declining in America today. We're often told that atheists and agnostics are taking over the spiritual marketplace, that millennials are shunning the church in ominous numbers, and that Christianity as we know it has more of a past than a future in our culture.

No one who reads Frank Newport's book on the subject would agree.

Newport is editor-in-chief of Gallup and the son of my intellectual mentor, Dr. John Newport. I first encountered Dr. Newport when I was a doctoral student and was immensely impressed with his genius and his humility. He held two earned doctorates and studied with many of the greatest minds of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, he was a man of deep and sincere faith, a humble servant of God's Kingdom.

His son has clearly followed in his father's footsteps.

Frank Newport earned his PhD in sociology at the University of Michigan and has become one of the most perceptive interpreters of contemporary culture today. In *God is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America* (New York: Gallup Press, 2012), he applies his remarkable expertise to the question of America's religious health.

His insights are based on hundreds of thousands of Gallup interviews—the organization conducts 1,000 a night, more than 350,000 interviews in a year. Here's the bottom line: Newport believes that religious commitment in America is increasing and will continue to do so.

What does the future hold?

Why would Newport claim that "God is alive and well" in America? Four of his arguments are especially relevant for Christian leaders today. (We will return to some of these below.)

One: People typically become more religious as they grow older. The baby boomer generation, as it ages, will likely reflect such increasing religiosity.

Two: More people are moving to states that are more highly religious. It is likely that many will be influenced by their new culture.

Three: Hispanics are more traditionally religious. As their numbers increase, so will their influence on culture.

Four: Religion plays a significantly positive role in good health outcomes. As more Americans realize this fact, they will be attracted to religious commitment.

The rise of the "nones"

If Americans are becoming more religious, what about the much-publicized rise of the "nones"? Those who tell interviewers they have no religious commitment have risen from virtually zero percent in the 1950s to around sixteen percent today. This escalation represents the fastest-growing religious demographic in America and has prompted many to conclude that our culture is quickly becoming irreligious.

While Newport admits that some of this growth reflects actual increases in adherence to atheism and agnosticism, he offers an interesting caveat. In his view, it would have been extremely unlikely for a person in the 1950s to admit that he or she had no religious adherence. This person would therefore respond to an interviewer by citing the religious commitment of his or her parents or upbringing. Today, being irreligious is more accepted. Thus the interviewee would be transparent in citing a lack of religious adherence.

In other words, many of the "nones" are likely no more irreligious than they were decades ago. But as society has changed, they have become more forthright in describing their religious views.

Before leaving the subject, Newport notes a related factor. Social scientists have been working to understand religiosity in generations that lived prior to polling. They do so by calculating church membership as a percentage of population, a factor they call "adherence rates."

The results are remarkable. According to sociologist Rodney Stark, "Church membership today is far higher than it was in colonial times, and . . . the membership rate has been rising for more than two hundred years" (p. 19). Newport's bottom line: "Americans have potential religious energy locked up, ready to be converted to activated energy if and when the time is right" (p. 19).

Is America a "Christian nation"?

Nearly eighty percent of Americans say they are Christians. But there's more. Remember that sixteen percent of us have no religious identity. As a result, ninety-five percent of Americans who have a religion are Christian.

This percentage is virtually identical to statistics from the 1950s, when more than ninety percent of Americans who had a religion were Christian. Americans who identify with a non-Christian religion comprise about five percent: Jews have decreased from four percent to two percent while other non-Christian religions have risen somewhat.

But there's an important distinction within this overall trend. Catholics have held steady as a subset of the American population, comprising between twenty and twenty-five percent. Meanwhile, Protestants have fallen from seventy percent to fifty-five percent. Why?

Newport cites three factors:

- Internal reproduction (birth rates), which strongly favor Catholics
- Conversion and missionary efforts, which have declined among Protestants
- Hispanic immigration, which strongly favors Catholics as well.

On the positive side for Protestants, the growth of thousands of microbrands and non-denominational megachurches has helped stem the tide of numerical losses. Nonetheless, denominational declines are clear and significant. Between 1967 and 2010:

- Methodists declined from fourteen to seven percent of the American population.
- Presbyterians declined from six to three percent.
- Episcopalians declined from three to two percent.
- Lutherans declined from eight to five percent.
- Baptists declined from twenty-one to seventeen percent.

What will help grow the American church?

Three factors are especially relevant to church growth today.

One: High member participation.

According to Newport, "religious groups that demand more from their members are more successful in retaining them" (p. 39). He cites the Marines, fraternities, Navy SEALs, and other groups with difficult entrance requirements, all of which retain enormous participant loyalty.

And he notes that groups with highest member participation—Mormons, evangelicals, Pentecostals, nondenominational Christians—are growing the fastest.

Two: Publicizing health benefits of religious adherence.

According to Newport, "religious Americans are healthier and happier than those who are not religious" (p. 47). He bases this conclusion on more than 676,000 Gallup-Healthways Well-Being interviews conducted in 2010 and 2011. His research focuses on those who are "very religious" (VR, forty-one percent of the population), "moderately religious" (MR,

thirty-one percent of the population), and "nonreligious" (NR, twenty-eight percent of the population).

Consider these examples:

- Worry: VR 28.6% / MR: 37.1% / NR: 33.0%.
- Stress: VR 35.8% / MR 44.0% / NR 43.8%.
- Anger: VR 11.3% / MR 16.2% / NR 16.1%.
- Smoking: VR 12.5% / NR: 26.4%.

Is this correlation or causation? In other words, does religious adherence cause better health, or are healthier people coincidentally more religious? Newport cites researchers who conclude: "Our findings suggest that religious people are more satisfied with their lives because they regularly attend religious services and build social networks in their congregations" (p. 60).

Three: Focusing on older and more educated adults.

Research indicates that people become more religious as they age. The percentage of "very religious" grows from forty percent at age eighteen to nearly sixty percent at age seventy-eight. Meanwhile, the percentage of "nonreligious" declines from twenty-eight percent at age eighteen to eighteen percent at age seventy-eight.

As a result, we should not be surprised by the current rejection of church adherence among millennials. According to Newport's data, this is a common generational trend, not a new phenomenon.

However, education is a factor in religious adherence. Belief in a God who answers prayer drops from ninety-two percent among those with a high school education or less down to seventy-one percent among those with postgraduate degrees. Ninety percent of those with low incomes say there is a God who answers prayers, compared with seventy-eight percent of those making \$90,000 a year or more.

As a result, those who seek to advance religious adherence should focus on those who are older, since they are demographically more open to religion. But we should also focus on those who are more educated, since they are typically less religious.

Newport's research and conclusions counter much of the gloom felt by Christian cultural observers today. He believes that the future of religion in America is more positive than negative. In his view, we will see "an America that will become a more religious nation in the years ahead, albeit one that may look a lot different, religiously speaking, than it does today" (p. 248).

God is at work in America. Here we find a third reason to be optimistic in a pessimistic culture.

Fact #4:

God is still the King of the universe

The facts we have explored so far show that our God is still on his throne. We should not be surprised, for his word declares the fact that he is eternally the King of the universe he created.

Jesus began his ministry with this announcement: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). He taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Why? What is the kingdom of God? Consider these biblical statements:

- “The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty” (Psalm 93:1).
- “The LORD will reign forever and ever” (Exodus 15:18).
- “I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King” (Isaiah 43:15).
- “The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever” (Psalm 29:10).
- “The LORD, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth” (Psalm 47:2).

- “Say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns!’” (Psalm 96:10).
- “The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!” (Psalm 97:1).
- “The LORD will be king over all the earth” (Zechariah 14:9).

Again and again, God’s word announces that the Lord is a king. In fact, he is the King. He rules the universe he created with omnipotence and omniscience.

One day the King will consummate his Kingdom: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne” (Matthew 25:31). His name will be “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Revelation 19:16). On that day, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

No matter what happens in our fallen world, God is still King. He measures the span of the universe with the palm of his hand (Isaiah 40:12). His power and wisdom are beyond our comprehension (Isaiah 55:8–9). His word will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8).

S. M. Lockridge was pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in San Diego from 1953 to 1993. The 20th century had no greater orator in the service of Jesus Christ. Consider this excerpt from one of his sermons:

The Bible says my King is the King of the Jews. He’s the King of Israel. He’s the King of Righteousness. He’s the King of the Ages. He’s the King of Heaven. He’s the King of Glory. He’s the King of kings, and He’s the Lord of lords. That’s my King.

I wonder, do you know Him?

My King is a sovereign King. No means of measure can define His limitless love. He’s enduringly strong. He’s entirely sincere. He’s eternally steadfast. He’s immortally graceful. He’s imperially powerful. He’s impartially merciful.

Do you know Him?

He’s the greatest phenomenon that has ever crossed the horizon of this world. He’s God’s Son. He’s the sinner’s Saviour. He’s the centrepiece of civilization. He’s unparalleled. He’s unprecedented.

He is the loftiest idea in literature. He's the highest personality in philosophy. He's the fundamental doctrine of true theology. He's the only one qualified to be an all sufficient Saviour.

I wonder if you know Him today?

He supplies strength for the weak. He's available for the tempted and the tried. He sympathizes and He saves. He strengthens and sustains. He guards and He guides. He heals the sick. He cleanses the lepers. He forgives sinners. He discharges debtors. He delivers the captive. He defends the feeble. He blesses the young. He serves the unfortunate. He regards the aged. He rewards the diligent. And He beautifies the meek.

I wonder if you know Him?

He's the key to knowledge. He's the wellspring of wisdom. He's the doorway of deliverance. He's the pathway of peace. He's the roadway of righteousness. He's the highway of holiness. He's the gateway of glory.

Do you know Him? Well . . .

His life is matchless. His goodness is limitless. His mercy is everlasting. His love never changes. His Word is enough. His grace is sufficient. His reign is righteous. And His yoke is easy. And His burden is light.

I wish I could describe Him to you. Yes . . .

He's indescribable! He's incomprehensible. He's invincible. He's irresistible. You can't get Him out of your mind. You can't get Him off of your hand. You can't outlive Him, and you can't live without Him. Well, the Pharisees couldn't stand Him, but they found out they couldn't stop Him. Pilate couldn't find any fault in Him. Herod couldn't kill Him. Death couldn't handle Him, and the grave couldn't hold Him.

Yeah! That's my King, that's my King.

Amen!

The sovereignty of our Father and King is great cause for optimism even in a pessimistic day.

Fact #5: God redeems all he allows

So far we have explored God's work around the world, among Muslims, and in America. We have seen that he is eternally the King of kings and Lord of lords.

But what about hard times? How can we be optimistic when pessimism seems so warranted in our lives?

My father died of heart disease at the age of fifty-five. I used to say that my greatest regret in life is that my father never met my sons. Then our oldest son was diagnosed with cancer. We watched him deal with surgery, weeks of radiation, and months of recuperation, with no guarantee that the cancer won't return in the future.

Why did God allow two of the people I love most to suffer so?

My father did nothing to cause his heart disease. He ate carefully and exercised regularly before his first attack, then was even more rigorous in maintaining his health for nineteen years before a second attack killed

him. Our son's cancer has nothing to do with lifestyle or environment—it is caused by a mutation of the gene PI3K/mtor. There are no causal factors that apply to him (a typical person with his cancer is a middle-aged female) and no treatments to prevent its recurrence.

Scripture teaches that God is all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful. "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8)—he knows your problems better than you do. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)—he loves us despite our sins and shortcomings. He "rules by his might forever" (Psalm 66:7), so that "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26)—he can solve any problem you face.

If God is all knowing, all loving, and all powerful, why does innocent suffering continue to plague our lives?

One factor is misused free will. God created us to love him and each other (Matthew 22:37–39), but love is a choice. The Lord wanted us to choose relationship with himself, so he made us in his image (Genesis 1:26–27) with free will (Genesis 2:15–17). When we misuse this freedom, the consequences are not God's fault but ours.

However, this fact does not explain innocent suffering. Neither my father nor my son caused their diseases through misused freedom. The six million Jews who died during the Holocaust were not victims of their own misused free will. Nor were those killed on 9/11 or in other terrorist attacks around the world.

The Fall is a second factor. When mankind fell into sin, all of creation was affected (Romans 8:22). In the Garden of Eden my father would not have suffered from heart disease, nor would my son have developed cancer. Some tragedies are the inevitable result of living in fallen bodies in a fallen world.

But this fact does not fully explain innocent suffering. God often intervenes in physical circumstances to prevent suffering and to heal disease. Why did he not do so for my father and my son?

Spiritual growth through suffering is a third factor, the so-called "soul building" approach to our issue. But I would return all the spiritual growth I have experienced from my father's death to have my father back

alive. Who would claim that the spiritual growth that resulted from the Holocaust compensated for the slaughter of so many millions?

As I have struggled with the question of innocent suffering, I have come to believe that this principle offers enormous hope: *God redeems all he allows.*

Here's my reasoning: Because God is sovereign, he must allow or cause all that happens. Because he is holy, he can never make a mistake. However, he makes a mistake if he allows or causes any suffering which he does not redeem for even greater good. As a result, his character requires him to redeem all he allows.

We may not understand such redemption, but we can believe more than we can understand. I don't understand air travel, but I get onto airplanes. I don't understand knee surgery, but I've had two such operations.

We may not see God's redemption in this lifetime, but we can still believe that he is working for the greater good (Romans 8:28). Paul testified, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). He noted, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

I am convinced that God is redeeming the Holocaust and 9/11 for even greater good. I believe that he is redeeming my father's early death and my son's cancer for greater good as well. I may not understand such redemption until I am in heaven, but I choose to believe it today.

Knowing that God redeems all he allows is great cause for optimism in a pessimistic day.

How to be optimistic in a pessimistic day

We have discovered five reasons for optimism in a pessimistic society. Let's close with some practical applications. How can we convey our optimism to those who need it most?

One: Choose optimism.

You cannot always choose your circumstances, but you can always choose how you respond to them. Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist and concentration camp survivor, documented the fact that prisoners who believed in tomorrow best survived the horrors of today.

Survivors of POW camps in Vietnam reported that a compelling hope for the future was the primary force that kept many of them alive. A mouse dropped in water will give up and drown in minutes. But if it is rescued, it will tread water for more than twenty hours the next time.

Scripture consistently calls us to choose optimism:

- "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).
- "Be strong and courageous. Do not be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6).
- "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" (Romans 12:12).
- "They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).
- "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).
- "I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more" (Psalm 71:14).
- "'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him'" (Lamentations 3:24).
- "Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love" (Psalm 33:18).
- "Preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:13).
- "God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).
- "Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD!" (Psalm 31:24).

As a result, we can choose to say with the psalmist, "And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you" (Psalm 39:7). Such optimism can be our most powerful witness to a pessimistic culture.

In one of the churches I pastored, I became close friends with a woman who was dying of cancer. Her disease progressed slowly over several years. Her pain became increasingly severe as the malignancy robbed her of strength and even breath. But her hope in Christ remained steadfast and strong.

Every time I visited her, I came away deeply impressed by the reality of her passion for Jesus and trust in his providence. She became one of the

strongest witnesses for Christ in our community. Many years after her death, people still remember her positive spirit and joy in Jesus.

The darker the room, the more powerful the light.

Two: Submit to the Spirit daily.

The Bible commands us to be "filled" with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). The word means to be submitted to or controlled by. This is a daily decision we must make.

Begin every day by consciously and intentionally surrendering it to the Spirit of God. Pray through your day, submitting your plans, challenges, and activities to him. As you encounter problems, give them to him. As you face decisions, submit to his leading. As you are tempted, pray for his help. If you fall to sin, ask him to forgive you, cleanse you, and restore you to your Father. Walk through the day in the presence of God.

As a result, you will experience the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22–23). Second on the list is "joy," a sense of well-being that transcends circumstances. You can have the joy of Jesus if you are surrendered to his Spirit. And Paul's prayer will be answered in your life: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Romans 15:13).

If Jesus is your Lord, you have all of God there is. Does he have all of you there is?

Three: Make positive choices.

A writer recently described "seven habits of optimistic people." Here's the list:

1. Express gratitude.
2. Donate time and energy.
3. Be interested in other people.
4. Surround yourself with upbeat people.
5. Don't listen to naysayers.
6. Forgive others.
7. Smile.

The last entry is especially interesting: according to a University of Kansas study, smiling reduces the intensity of your body's stress response, whether you feel happy or not.

Shouldn't Christians of all people be public exhibits of all seven habits? We should be grateful every day for our salvation in Christ and status as children of the King of Kings. We are called to donate our time and energy to Kingdom causes with eternal significance. Our Lord taught us to love one another as he loves us (John 13:34–35). We can surround ourselves with fellow optimists as part of the family of God. We should listen to the Spirit, not to naysayers and negative messengers of cultural deceit. We are called to forgive as we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32). And we can smile in the face of adversity, knowing that we are in our Father's hands (John 10:28–29).

Optimism can be not just a choice but a lifestyle.

Four: Offer hope to others.

Austin pastor Gerald Mann saw his church grow from sixty to 4,000 in fourteen years. His explanation: "I know three things people want when they come to church: they want help, they want home, and they want hope."

If we will choose optimism, submit to the Spirit, and develop a lifestyle of hope, our lives will be a strong witness for the God of all hope. But it's not enough to live in hope—we need to share our hope with others. Scripture is clear: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29).

Find opportunities to share your hope with those who need hope the most. Offer discouraged people the gift of your joyful presence and intercession. Share with them the hope you have found in Christ.

If you faced a terminal malignancy but your doctor discovered a chemotherapy that cured you, would you not want to share that discovery with other cancer patients?

Scripture requires us to avoid condemning or slandering others, no matter how much we disagree with them. If a person sins against us, we are to go directly to that person (Matthew 18:15). We must not speak about, but

only to, those with whom we have challenges. We are to "speak evil of no one" and to "show perfect courtesy toward all people" (Titus 3:2).

This principle applies to our leaders as well. We are called to be "submissive to rulers and authorities" (Titus 3:1; cf. Hebrews 13:17; Romans 13:1). We are to pray for them (1 Timothy 2:2) and honor them (1 Peter 2:17). During this political season with all its negativity, it's even more important that Christians speak respectfully and live joyfully.

"Speaking the truth in love" is to be our goal in everything we say (Ephesians 4:15). For a culture starved for good news, we have the best news of all.

Conclusion

Nehemiah declared, "the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). That's because "he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Optimism in a pessimistic day should be a natural result of the Spirit at work in our lives and words. But note: Only when we belong fully to God can we know the fullness of his Spirit. So let's close this study not by trying harder to do better, but by surrendering our lives joyfully to the God of all joy.

Watchman Nee:

A day must come in our lives, as definite as the day of our conversion, when we give up all right to ourselves and submit to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. . . . There must be a day when, without reservation, we surrender everything to Him—ourselves, our families, our possessions, our business and our time. All we are and have becomes His, to be held henceforth entirely at His disposal. From that day we are no longer our own masters, but only stewards.

Not until the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a settled thing in our hearts can the Holy Spirit really operate effectively in us. He cannot direct our lives until all control of them is committed to Him. If we do not give Him absolute authority in our lives, He can be present, but He cannot be powerful. The power of the Spirit is stayed.

Is today that day for you?

If it is, every time you are tempted by pessimism you can turn to the "God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3). He is the One "who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (v. 4).

The more we know the God of hope, the more others will find hope in God through us. So as you live in the midst of a culture filled with discouragement, choose optimism. Your Father is the King of the universe, redeeming all he allows for his glory and our good. He is at work in miraculous ways around the world, among the Muslim people, and in our own culture.

It's always too soon to give up on God. And it's always too soon to give up on today. Ralph Waldo Emerson:

*Write it on your heart
that every day is the best day in the year.
He is rich who owns the day, and no one owns the day
who allows it to be invaded with fret and anxiety.*

*Finish every day and be done with it.
You have done what you could.
Some blunders and absurdities, no doubt crept in.
Forget them as soon as you can, tomorrow is a new day;
begin it well and serenely, with too high a spirit
to be cumbered with your old nonsense.*

*This new day is too dear,
with its hopes and invitations,
to waste a moment on the yesterdays.*

All of God there is, is in this moment.

About the Author



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is a cultural apologist, building a bridge between faith and culture by engaging contemporary issues with biblical truth. He founded the Denison Forum on Truth and Culture in February 2009. Since that time, he has spoken to over 100,000 people. He is the author of seven books, including his most recent, *Radical Islam: What You Need to Know*.

Dr. Denison writes a cultural commentary available at denisonforum.org. His free daily commentary is distributed around the world to over 90,000 subscribers in 203 countries. He writes for the Dallas Morning News, contributing weekly to the “Texas Faith Blog,” and is a guest columnist for The Christian Post. He has also taught world religions for 25 years with four seminaries. He has spoken in China, Cuba, Brazil, Australia, Europe, Israel, Greece, Egypt, Bangladesh, and Turkey and served as a short-term missionary to East Malaysia, in Southeast Asia. He also leads frequent study tours in Israel, Greece, and Europe.

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