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# FINDING A FUTURE IN GOD'S WORD

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

*"The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining brighter and brighter until midday." ~Proverbs 4:18*

The Bible isn't like a textbook filled with static facts. God wants His word to actively counsel us in the midst of our days, giving us insight and understanding about the choices we face and the problems we want to resolve. If we'll look for it to happen, verses from the Bible will often rise to the surface of our awareness, and they act as incredibly effective navigation points and answer-givers by which we can steer our course. God's word has the uncanny ability to burrow down to the true heart of every matter (Hebrews 4:12), separating issues well enough for us to see what's really going on in our heart—or in others.'

Sometimes, general principles taken from Bible verses help us make decisions about what to say or do. For instance, lots of Scripture alerts us to the undesirability of debt because of how debt takes away our freedom and causes us to come under the hand of a stranger (Proverbs 6:1-5; 22:7). Facing a decision about our future, we would likely want to make the choice that reduced or eliminated our debt—rather than increasing it! There certainly are exceptions (*like getting a mortgage*)—it isn't a rigid, hard and fast rule. But the general, biblical principle counsels us.

Other times, verses from the Bible give us precise direction and prompt us to action. For example, when reading about the ministry of reconciliation God has entrusted to us (2 Corinthians 5:17-21), we might find our mind/heart thinking about a broken relationship from our past—and know that it's time to write a letter of apology. That doesn't mean we accept total responsibility for the *not-as-it-used-to-be* condition of the relationship; neither is it completely up to us to repair the relationship. Rather, as another verse counsels us, "*If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men*" (Romans 12:18). The whole counsel of God informs our thinking. Amazing things happen as a result of responding to such promptings.

Additionally, when you are praying with or for someone else, you will find that Bible passages and phrases come unbidden to your mind. When they just pop into your consciousness—especially when a cluster of verses come to you—it's clear that the Lord is saying something *spiritual* to that

person. By *spiritual*, I don't mean weird; just different than how that person would naturally think. Let's say a friend comes to you seeking counsel about a difficult work situation: the manager is unnecessarily harsh and critical of your friend, and often takes advantage of her diligence and work ethic by forcing her to cover for the manager's longer-than-appropriate lunch break; by taking the credit for her work; and, by blaming her (*in front of the others*) for his mistakes.

## WHAT'S YOUR COUNSEL?

Suppose the verses that flood into your awareness are passages like, "*Turn the other [cheek]...*" (*Matthew 5:39*); "*Submit even to those who are unreasonable*" (*1 Peter 2:18-20*); and, "*If anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.*" (*James 5:13*)? Would you suggest a different course to you friend if the verses in your mind were, "*Don't be bound together with unbelievers [unequally yoked]...*" (*2 Corinthians 6:14*); "*...David arose and fled that day from Saul...*" (*1 Samuel 21:10*); and, "*Great persecution against the church...and they were all scattered throughout regions...*" (*Acts 8:1*)?

That's what I mean by saying the word of God is living and effective; the Holy Spirit applies Scripture personally to each situation. Can people manipulate texts to justify their unrighteous stance in any given matter? Yes. But should that make us back away from eager anticipation that God will counsel us with His "*eye upon*" us (*Psalms 32:8*)? No! Solomon understood that "*in abundance of counselors there is victory*" (*Proverbs 11:14*), and he undoubtedly learned from his father's words: "*[God's] testimonies also are my delight; they are my counselors*" (*Psalms 119:24*).

It's incredible, when you think about it. God leads us in the way we should go by counseling us with His written word, brought to our remembrance by His Spirit (*John 14:26*), for the purpose of making us more like His Son (*Romans 8:28-29*)!

## PHILIPPIANS 1:6

As a pastor, I often have the privilege of receiving such counsel for the direction/focus of our entire church program, as well as for individuals in our church. Sometimes, my prayers for you trigger an answer from the Lord that involves the sort of scripture in my heart I've been describing. Quite frequently, I get a thematic cluster of verses without having been seeking the Lord for specific direction. I suppose the unlooked for leading of the Lord, in this regard, is much like what He does in our individual lives as we pray in the Spirit. Because "*we do not know how to pray, as we should...the Holy Spirit intercedes for us...*" (*Romans 8:26-27*). It's so amazingly fun to be led by the Lord, especially when we don't even know that we need leading. He simply wants to do something wonderful to us and through us.

*Reflections from Scripture*

Let me offer to you—for your consideration and reflection—referencing a cluster of Bible passages that came unbidden to my heart for you (and me) in the days before us...

*LUKE 2:52—“And Jesus keep increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”*

*PROVERBS 4:18—Our path will get brighter and brighter just as the sun rises toward noon.*

*2 CORINTHIANS 3:17-18—The liberating work of the Spirit changes us more and more.*

*JEREMIAH 23:7-8—God's got future deliverances planned for us, not just past ones.*

*HAGGAI 2:9—The glory of the latter house will be greater than the one that has been.*

*PROVERBS 3:5-6—Rely on God, not ourselves, to access a more “straightened-out” future.*

*PSALM 42:11—“Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God.”*

*PSALM 37:1-6—“Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers. For they will wither quickly like the grass and fade like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He will do it. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your judgment as the noonday.”*

*PHILIPPIANS 3:1-16—“Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.*

*Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.*

*But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

*Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by the same standard to which we have attained.”*  
~Philippians 3:1-16

#### *Note Regarding Paul's Reference to Circumcision*

Circumcision, the sign setting God's people apart from the rest of the world, was a permanent cutting away of human effort and self-protection from the very point the seed of life issues forth—the future and its promise. All who trust Christ for the future He's summoning us to share with Him are circumcised, as well—the separation of our flesh from the part of us that has a future with Him is as final as the cutting away of a foreskin on the eighth day. That's why Paul could call his human efforts/goodness “rubbish,” because none of it could make him close to Christ. And that's why he rejoiced in never being tied to his past, always free to say, “yes” to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

## **HOPE FOR A BRIGHTER DAY**

On any given day, our life in the Lord can seem anything but brighter than it was yesterday! Stuff happens; steady day-by-day devotional reading can disappear in three days time. Some mornings I wake up feeling spiritually lousy, and I can't put my finger on why. Weeks or months of spiritual vitality are sometimes followed inexplicably with long seasons of drought. We're up...and down; we progress...and fall back. Regardless of why we end up in spiritual doldrums, a common reaction is despair: a hopeless, “*I'll never get out of this downward spiral*” sense that “THIS IS THE END” (see Psalm 42:11).

Many things can lead to a sense of a spiritual impasse in our lives. Our study isn't focusing primarily on WHY we feel stuck and alone, or why we lose momentum in our spiritual walk. Let me

caution us not to race too quickly toward blame—of ourselves or others—in our efforts to explain why things aren't going as well as they once did. I want to keep us focused on the promises of Scripture that give us hope for a brighter future, regardless of what has been trying to dim our hopes.

I'm not saying that it doesn't matter why we've ended up feeling out-of-sorts spiritually; it does matter if it's something we can stop (*like our own behavior or attitude*) in order to prevent future spiritual lassitude. I'm not saying that God does not care about the situation we're in; He does, and He is able to deliver us from it!

But, the great news is that God has promises in His word to address spiritual lethargy and to reinvigorate our sense of calling/purpose on Earth. Those promises can be applied to our lives no matter why/how we've ended up with so little real hope about a brighter tomorrow! Innocent victims, guilty perpetrators, negligent sons, willful daughters, busy moms, too-busy dads, legalists, prisoners, judges, the longsuffering or the short-of-spirit (*quitters*)—all these can take hope in God's promises for our future:

*“For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.” ~Philippians 1:6*

How we got where we are—whether it is our fault, others' or no one's—is not the key to getting us into His future for us. He is the answer to all of our tomorrows, and by His grace He will lead us on ever brighter and ever higher.

## **BRIEF REVIEW**

Since so many of God's ways and thoughts are wildly different from ours, it shouldn't be a surprise to discover that He looks at very different things than we do. For instance, people tend to look at the outside appearance, *“but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7)*. Because we are unable to see the future and what will be, we fix most of our attention on what is and what has been; God, on the other hand, lives beyond the element of time, so He is focused mostly on what is still to be.

*“That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by.” ~Ecclesiastes 3:15*

To God, it's all a re-run. Although we can't even see the future, God can. That's why He looks at it and we don't! This has huge implications for us—and for our future. Because we have a very limited awareness, confined within the past and the present, we tend to conclude that our future must somehow emerge from what has been or what is currently true of our life. We think the future is determined by what precedes it: *“I won't have enough money in the future for this bill if I don't have*

*enough for it now”; “I’ll never have the job of my dreams if it hasn’t happened yet”; “I’ve been rejected my whole life, so I guess that’s what will always be my lot!”*

The reason you and I can have any hope for a brighter future rests on this simple truth: God has the power and the desire to make a future for us based on His plans for us—**rather than on our own history**. Do some things that happen now have consequences for the future? Yes. But they do not *determine* our future.

### **TIMELESS IMPLICATIONS**

Think of it another way. If we consider time as three geographic locations—countries called *Past*, *Present* and *Future*—then as you travel west you would start in “*Past*,” cross the border into “*Present*,” and finally end up in “*Future*.” In the natural arena, time has three simple and chronological segments. Spiritually speaking, however, our past, present and future aren’t equally connected or sequential. The country *Future* shares very little border with the other two countries—and *Future* is divided by an impassable mountain range into two regions. There is no way to get from *Present* to the other side of *Future* unless God transports us there.

God is always calling us into our future. He calls us away from today and yesterday, so we can enjoy tomorrow. Sometimes the journey away from our past and out of our present takes longer than we had hoped. But His is a relentless transport ever working on our behalf, pressing us “*forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead*” (*Philippians 3:13*).