



OUR LIFELINE

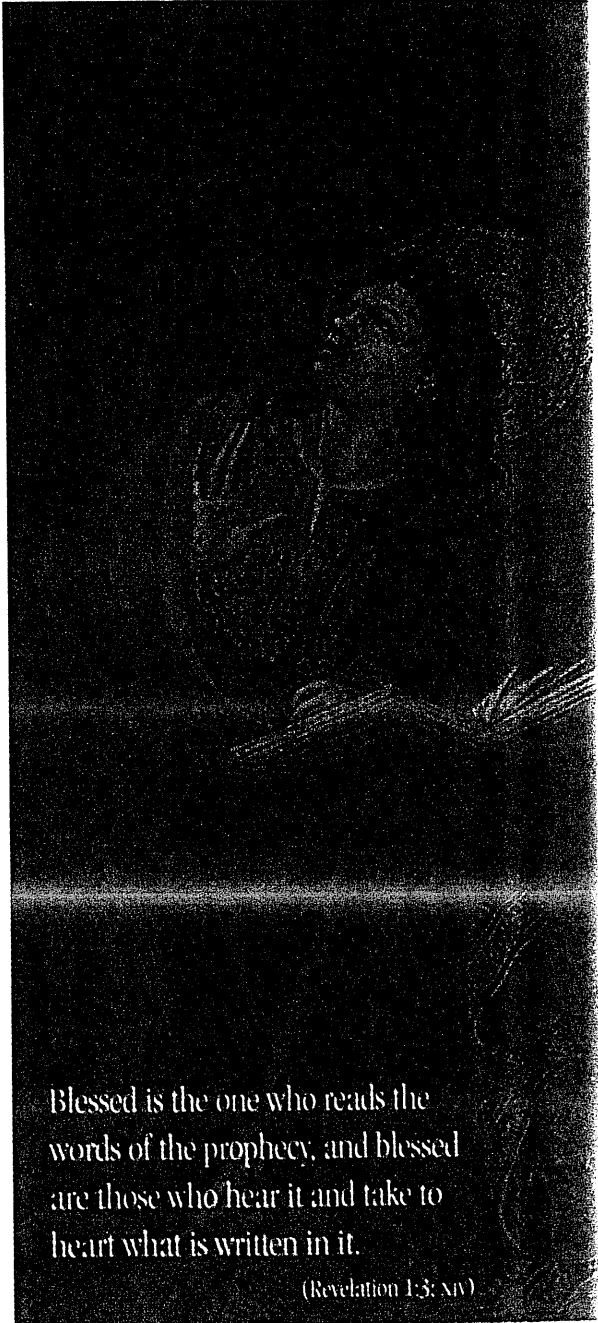
The Bible is the rope God throws us in order to ensure that we stay connected while the rescue is in progress.

J. I. PACKER

A lifeline is a rope to which a drowning person clings while being pulled ashore. Drowning is a condition of being invaded and overwhelmed by water, which gets into your lungs so that you cannot breathe. Metaphorically, you can be said to drown in sorrow, or grief, or any other invasive mood that disrupts normal personal life.

Today we are surrounded by people drowning in the raging waters of hopelessness. The proverb rightly says that while there's life there's hope, but the deeper truth is that only while there's hope is there life: When the light of hope goes out, and there really seems nothing to live for anymore, life itself becomes a killing burden. We are so made that we live very much in our future, and the desolation of feeling that there is nothing worthwhile to come, nothing good ever to be expected again, eats the soul away like a corrosive acid.

To moderns drowning in hopelessness, disappointed, disillusioned, despairing, emotionally isolated, bitter and aching inside, Bible truth comes as a lifeline, for it is future-oriented and hope-centered throughout. The God of the Bible, whom Christians know as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit united in a shared divine life, is both a very present help in trouble and a very potent hope in times of despair. The triune God, we might say, is the lifeguard, who, in true *Baywatch* fashion, comes in person to the place where we are drowning in order to rescue us; the Holy Scriptures are the lifeline God throws us in order to ensure that he and we stay connected

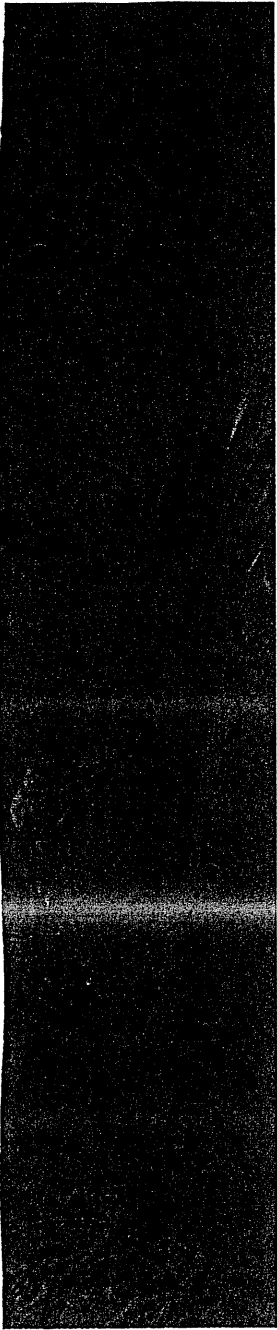


Blessed is the one who reads the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.

(Revelation 1:3: XIV)

while the rescue is in progress; and the hope that the Scriptures bring us arrests and reverses the drowning experience here and now, generating inward vitality and renewed joy and banishing forever the sense of having the life choked out of us as the waves break over us.

That the Bible throughout is a book of hope is not always appreciated, but it is so. From the giving of the promise that the woman's seed will crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15), the Old Testament constantly looks forward to great restorative things that God will do for his people and his world. The New Testament nails down this hope by its repeated assurances that the Lord Jesus Christ, our divine Sinner-bearer and present heavenly Friend, is with us by his Spirit to keep us sane and safe till he returns to re-create the cosmos and lead us all into unimaginable



endless glory with himself. Meantime, he gives our lives permanent and satisfying meaning by making us his servants, with jobs to do, and that is a relationship that will continue forever. In a world in which the individual's natural sense of significance is so largely snuffed out, such a hope is a lifeline indeed.

The deep-level story of the twentieth century is of hope destroyed. In 1900 the hope was that this would be "the Christian century." The church would spread, the ethnic religions would crumble, all humankind would be Christianized, and the kingdom of God would come on earth.

These hopes failed to reckon with the titanic energy of human sin. What has happened is the opposite of what was looked for. Our century has seen two nightmarish world wars, each followed by a spectacular failure to win the peace and make militarism a thing of the past.

Meanwhile, Christianity in all its forms has lost its grip on the West, which now leads the world in materialistic, relativistic, and hedonistic secularization. The size of its arms industry is the measure of its cynicism; the size of its abortion industry is the measure of its paganism. The global culture that has established itself is not a Christian ideology but a technological monster, raping the planet for financial profit and generating horrendous ecological prospects for

our grandchildren. The great Asian religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, have come to new life to oppose global Christianity. Our era has turned into an age of atrocity, in which the barbarian obscenities of terrorism, genocide, torture, and religious and political persecution have re-established themselves on a grander scale than ever before.

The prospectus of an overseas hotel catering to English-speaking tourists declared: "Our wines leave you nothing to hope for"—a classic example of not saying quite what you mean. But anyone who said that our century leaves us nothing to hope for would undoubtedly be expressing exactly what was meant, and what was meant would be true. At such a time the Bible's message of personal and cosmic hope beyond the present order of things is a lifeline for us indeed.

SCRIPTURE AND HOPE

Four-and-a-half centuries ago Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and his colleagues, discerning the crucial link between Scripture and hope, composed for the Anglican Prayer Book the following petition:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Several points should be noted with regard to this prayer.

First, it is set for use each second Sunday in Advent, when Romans 15:4-13 is the New Testament epistle reading that follows it. It echoes the epistle; it is in fact the message of the epistle distilled into petitionary form. This demonstrates to us the right use of the Bible in the devotional life. God's Word comes to us so that we may know how to speak our word to him. God approaches us humans in and by his Word, disclosing himself there; we worshipers take that word of revelation and turn it into praise, prayer, and adoration as we approach God in response. Christian prayer in essence is never blind groping, but always builds intelligently on what God himself says.

Second, the prayer echoes 2 Timothy 3:16 as well as Romans 15:4 in affirming that *all* Holy Scripture has in the providence of God been written for our learning—learning, that is, on the part of every congregation and individual in any and every age. So, in the life both of the church and of the individual, the whole Bible is to be used.

We all tend to limit our Bible reading to our own favorite passages or books, and this can lead to inadequate views of God and unbalanced spiritual development. At one time, many Christians possessed a promise box, packed with divine promises from Scripture on separate slips of paper, to be drawn out at random as a kind of pick-me-up when inspiration and encouragement were felt to be needed. So far, so good; but should these saints not also have had a precept box, or even a threat box, beside their promise box to counterbalance this one-sided practice?

Boxed texts cannot set before us anything like the full sweep of Scripture. Nor should we restrict our biblical diet, as some do, to a few familiar psalms and the four Gospels. No doubt there is in any one of these portions of Holy Writ more than we shall ever fathom, but we are less likely to plumb their depths if we isolate them from the rest of God's revelation. By all means let us read and reread our favorite passages as often as we want to, but all Scripture should be regularly read as well.

Third, this prayer tells us that we who are literate should not only *read* Scripture for ourselves as well as hear it read in church, but should *mark, learn, and inwardly digest* it. A progression of intensity in application is being outlined here. We are

to read Scripture attentively and retentively. Learning by rote—that is, memorizing—has gone out of fashion, but we can hardly afford to do without it. Bishop Nicholas Ridley, one of the English Reformation martyrs, looked back to the days when:

I learned without book almost all Paul's epistles. . . . Of which study, although in time a great part did depart from me, yet the sweet smell thereof I trust I shall carry into heaven; for the profit thereof I think I have felt in all my life time ever after.

Marking and learning the Scriptures (that is, taking full note of them and appreciating their full weight) requires some form of memorization; then masticating them (the first step toward inwardly digesting them) requires meditation (probing imagination, prayerful reflection, and personal application); and absorbing them into one's spiritual system requires appetite—a constant craving to know God and his truth. It is a striking fact of Christian experience everywhere that the Bible feeds not only the hungry heart but the hunger itself, constantly increasing our appetite to know more of God and hence our passion to dig more deeply into his Word.

We see this in the psalmist, to whom God's words were sweeter than honey (119:103), and whose longing for God's commandments—that is, for insight into them and fulfillment of them—

nagged at his heart as hunger and thirst nag at our bodily consciousness (119:18, 20, 123, 131).

Fourth, the prayer tells us that “comfort” from Scripture sustains Christians in their hope that unending present grace will lead them on to unending eternal glory. *Comfort* here carries the sixteenth-century, King-James-Version sense drawn from the Latin verb *confortare*, which means “make strong.” Comfort of this sort is not the soothing that ends tension and makes you relax, but the strengthening that comes from encouragement that energizes and puts new heart into you. The Bayeux tapestry celebrating the Norman conquest of England depicts King Harold urging his troops forward at the Battle of Hastings, and *confortat* (comforts!) is the verb used in the caption.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

To illustrate the power of Scripture as a lifeline that sustains hope, let me be autobiographical for a moment. For 15 years I worked to fulfill a vision of evangelical quickening in England through theological education, spiritual formation, pastoral enrichment, profound preaching, wise evangelism, functional Christian unity, and every-member ministry in local congregations—a vision generated by the type of pure biblical theology that some label Puritan Calvinism. Put like that, of course, this vision sounds grandiose to a fault, and though I retain my hold on it—or, rather, it retains its

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My favorite Old Testament passage: Ecclesiastes 12:13–14

The Gospel Bassoon

I tell people to read the most important books of the Bible most often, and I read Scripture that way myself. But most often of all I go back to the 10-page wisdom tract called Ecclesiastes (Greek for “preacher,” rendering a Hebrew word that also means teacher, spokesman, philosopher, and pundit).

Sheer bracing delight is the reason: Ecclesiastes does me good. What he says, sadly and beautifully, about the pain of brainwork (the more you know, the more it hurts), about the boredom of the supposedly interesting and the hollowness of achievement (all pointless! like trying to grasp the wind!), about the crazy-quilt character of life, about our ignorance of what God is up to, and about death as life's solitary certainty, grabs me deep down: for I felt all this as an adolescent, and still do.

What he says about life's best being enjoyment of the basics—one's work, meals, and marriage—makes me want to laugh and cheer, for this, too, is what I have felt all my adult life. My built-in

makeup as an antihype, anti-Pollyanna reality man anchors me in Ecclesiastes' corner, where realism is the name of the game. I know, of course, that feelings, in the sense of emotionally charged intuitions, especially gloomy ones, can be quite unrealistic, so it gives me a large charge to find that some of my own deepest reactions belong to biblical wisdom.

The text that runs most constantly round my heart is Ecclesiastes' admonitory exit line: “Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man [everybody]. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Eccles. 12:13–14, NIV). In face of life's randomness and bitterness, says the writer, I must keep worshiping and doing what I have been told to do; then I can't go wrong.

At the judgment, sheep will be identified by their behavior as well as goats: so the statement that God will take

account of everything

done is not a legalistic threat, but an evangelical encouragement. It tells me that ongoing worship and obedience when I feel frustrated, frantic, hurt, cynical, rebellious, and sick of trying actually counts. God is very concerned that I would keep on keeping on in the godly life, no matter what.

The statement is really a bassoon version, in Old Testament terms, of Paul's trumpets-and-drums declaration in 1 Corinthians 15:58: “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (NASB). The notes may be an octave lower, but the tune is the same, and bassoon gravity can strike just as deep as trumpet brilliance. So Ecclesiastes helps me hear Paul; and Paul helps me understand Ecclesiastes; and with these twin texts echoing in my ears, I go on my way rejoicing. **CT**



hold on me—I am not here concerned to defend it against its critics.

I simply record that after 15 years of actively promoting it came several years during which, through what people with other visions did in perfectly good faith to block more or less directly the things I was after, I lost all the vantage-points I had had for implementing the purposes that the vision dictated. I found myself marginalized, isolated, and required to work to unfulfilling and, I thought, flawed agendas, in a manner that made me think of the Israelites having to make bricks for Pharaoh; and for political reasons, I was not free to say what I thought about this state of affairs. Outwardly appreciated, at least by some, as a useful Christian performer, I lived, like Moses in Midian, with frustration in my heart, wondering what God, who as I believed gave the vision in the first place, could possibly be up to.

The Bible, however, kept assuring me that God knows his business, so even though I expected to soldier on where I was till retirement, I had hope. During those years my spiritual education was proceeding. Here are the main lessons that God through his Word hammered into my heart:

Good will. I should not get bitter or lapse into self-pity or spend time complaining or angling for sympathy. God was using my ministry, and I was forbidden to get fixated on my frustrations.

Hope. I was not to become cynical or apathetic about the vision I had been given or to abandon it because there was no immediate way of advancing it. God is never in a hurry, and waiting in hope is a Christian discipline.

Faithfulness. As husband, father, teacher, honorary assistant pastor, and occasional author, I had plenty each day to get on with, and I could not honor God by slackness and negligence, whatever discontents I was carrying around inside me.

Compassion. Clearly I was being taught to empathize more deeply with the many Christians, lay and ordained, male and female, who live with various kinds of disappointments and thus were in the same boat as myself.

Humility. I must never forget that God is supreme and important, and I am neither, and he can manage very well without me whenever he chooses to do so.

God alone knows how far I managed to live out these lessons, but there was no lack of clarity as he presented them to me from the Scriptures.

In due course things changed. With clear guidance from inner conviction and outward circumstances, both biblically judged, my wife and I emigrated, and today I follow the gleam of the original vision of reformation and revival in a larger world than England.

Tabasco sauce gains its flavor from the oak barrels in which it matures. I suspect that those final years in England were a sort of oak barrel period for me, but I leave that for others to decide.

But I have totally verified the wisdom of David's words in Psalm 27:14—"Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD"—and so far as ongoing hope is concerned, truths I keep meeting in Scripture have taken me

I have my dream of Christianity freed from relativism . . . and antibiblicism.

back over and over again before, during, and since the years of frustration.

The Bible a lifeline? It has certainly been so for me.

THE LIVELY ORACLES OF GOD

I often make reference in public to the words set to be spoken by the moderator of the Church of Scotland in the British Coronation service as he hands the new monarch the Bible. He calls it "the most valuable thing that this world affords, . . . wisdom . . . the royal law . . . the lively oracles of God." My goal in writing has been to confirm that estimate and to bring my readers to the point at which, with John Newton, their hearts say:

*Precious Bible! what a treasure
Does the Word of God afford!
All I want for life or pleasure,
Food and medicine, shield and sword;
Let the world account me poor—
Christ and this, I need no more.*

Western Christianity has become superficial and shallow: we do not give ourselves time to soak ourselves in Scripture, and stunted spiritual development, which includes an undervaluing of the Bible, is the unhappy result. We need to be clear that, other things being equal, it is the Christians who eat up the Scriptures on a regular basis who are likely to achieve most for our Lord Jesus Christ in the future, just as it was Bible-fed Christians who achieved most for him in the past.

Shall we see in these days a return to a type of Christianity where the precious treasure of God's written Word is honored for what it is and used as it should be for life, and health, and peace? As Martin Luther King had his dream of an America freed from racism, so I have my dream of Christianity freed from relativism, skepticism, anti-intellectualism, and antibiblicism: a Christianity whose adherents are all learning to testify to the truth and power of the Scriptures, and to stand together to proclaim biblical truth as it is in Jesus.

I believe I have seen something of this already, in the very remarkable worldwide evangelical advance during the past half-century; shall I see any more of it in my lifetime? I do not know. But God is on the throne, and I have hope in him. **CT**

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