

Sermon Title: When The World Is Upside Down  
Scripture Text: Is. 5:8-23; Phil. 2:14-16; 2 Pet. 3:11-12

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 1-1-23

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I believe it was somewhere around 30 years ago that I had some things kind of burning a hole in my heart. It was the beginning of the year, and I decided to preach a New Year sermon, and then I kept doing it. And it has become, in some years, a joyful tradition; some years, like a burden—"What am I going to say?"; some years, "Oh, what am I going to cut out from the fifty things that I want to say?" It is always a bit of an adventure, but we are going to do it again this year.

It's amazing how we will change a number on a calendar, and think that something has changed, when it really hasn't. But I love to help people get a perspective on things: that we are one local church, one fellowship—a delightful fellowship of God's people. By the way: In this calendar year, we are going to turn 20; Heritage Bible Church will have its 20th Anniversary this fall, so figure out what kind of cake you are going to make for that. But let's keep this perspective, and understand: We are part of something *way bigger* than us; we have brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world in fellowships like this, or similar to this (cf. 1 Pet. 5:9).

We are part of something that is way older than us; this has been going on for nearly 2,000 years. And so it is at least a short-sighted thing, and I'm tempted to say a *sinful* thing, for people to want to *get away from* all of the traditions. That would be like saying, "Oh, don't invite Grandma to Thanksgiving this year. I mean, you know, that's not our generation. She's not cool." We don't want to have a perspective like that.

So, let's start with a cliché, shall we? "Last year was unprecedented." Well, they all are, if you think about it. We *do* know that we are closer than ever to the Rapture (Rom. 13:11; cf. 1 Thess. 4:16-17), and that is a good thing. More than ever, we know that around the world the table is set for the circumstances that will bring the Antichrist to world power after God removes His Church from the world (1 Jn. 2:18a; cf. Dan. 9:26-27; 2 Thess. 2:3-12); that, too, is a good thing, because it is the unfolding of God's plan (cf. Eph. 1:11; Rev. 17:17).

In these last couple of years, we have seen God use an overblown reaction to a virus as a test-case to show how the *entire* population of the planet can be manipulated and made to kowtow to panic and to give up freedom out of fear. I think it is easier than ever for us to see, plausibly, how the great deception mentioned in Second Thessalonians Chapter 2 can occur.

Now, on that front, I have to say: 2022 was *less* of a debacle than 2020 and 2021. But all the *bad things* about the powers of ungodly governments and unsaved people in crucial positions of authority—all those things continue to simmer; and there will come the day that the heat will be turned back up, and they will come back; and it will be just as bad as it was, only worse.

In 2022 in our country, we *did* see some very significant things unfold. In the U.S., Christians and many others rejoiced when the Supreme Court overturned one of its worst-ever decisions: the 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision, in which the Supreme Court made up something that is *not* in the Constitution, and supposedly found this "right" to abortion. That *was* the right thing to do, because it was a wrong decision on a wrong basis, and it

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---

was totally anti-God. But now that *that* decision has been overturned, this alleged "right" to exterminate unborn children is now passed down state-by-state; and so, where people stand is becoming more and more obvious—there are fewer places to hide on that subject (cf. Prov. 24:11-12). And I would say the battle is more intense *now* than it was before Roe v. Wade was overturned.

We now have a president who is dead-set on not even *pretending* that he has a different agenda; he wants to make sure there are as many abortions as possible in the United States, *and* that you and I are forced to pay for some of them with our taxes. That is a *terrible* position to hold in the sight of God (cf. Ezek. 16:21; 23:37-39), who knows all about it (cf. Ps. 94:20). By the way: The mayor of Boise is of exactly the same ilk!

So it's not just, you know, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" called Washington, D.C.—*this is here!* This is now! There is a *battle* going on for people who want to demand the right to exterminate unborn children! (cf. Jer. 20:17; Lk. 1:41)

Our first granddaughter is due to be born. Can you even *fathom the idea* of snuffing out that life? That is *always* a devastating thing—not only to the one that dies, but those who make the decisions. And it becomes a Gospel opportunity to minister to people who have passed through those horrible waters.

Well, fueled by what they perceive as an *ominous* thing in the overturning of Roe vs. Wade, the anti-God folks in our country have rushed to create a law that codifies another abominable Supreme Court ruling: the Obergefell decision from 2015, which again created *out of nothing* an imagined right that so-called "same sex marriage" is okay and legal, and there is a right to it (contra Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:9-10). Again, our president belies his claim to be a *devout* God-fearing Roman Catholic; he is throwing *all of his power* behind anti-God, anti-reality policies!

What a *great day* to live as an "ambassador" of the Kingdom of Heaven! (2 Cor. 5:18-20) It is easier for the Light to be seen when the backdrop is darker and darker. These are the days that God has granted to us, to represent Him here.

Well, the result of that plan was this horribly titled "Respect for Marriage Act"—which completely *disrespects* marriage (Mk. 10:6-7), and makes up something that is fantasy in its place. It is even worse than the Obergefell vs. Hodges court decision, because the new law goes *further* than that Supreme Court decision did, *and* it paves the way to legal attacks for criminal prosecution against any individual or group or church which holds to the definition of marriage as one man and one woman (cf. 1 Cor. 7:2).

And I don't know if you know that in the process of that, there were a number of proposed amendments to that law to *guarantee* that people would not be prosecuted for standing on their religious conviction—and *they refused to even hear* those amendments! *They're coming for us!* This is *the best time ever* to be a representative of the Kingdom of God, and "let your light shine" (Matt. 5:16), because the darker the background, the easier it is to show the Light.

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---

You know, you can call other things "marriage," if you want to. You can make them legal, if you want to. You just can't make them into *reality*!

The same thing applies to the stuff going on about "transgenderism." Changing labels *doesn't change reality*! Now, "gender dysphoria"—*it is a thing*; there *are* confused people. And there are a *slew* of sources in our world seeking to fan the flames of that confusion, and get more and more kids involved with it. But the answer to those things is not body-altering drugs and surgery, it's Jesus Christ—*that's the answer*! (Jn. 8:36)

I read a satirical headline this week that a bicyclist now identifies as a motorcyclist, and is winning *every* race in record times. Now, we laugh at that because that is *patently absurd*—and that is *exactly* the same logic as a man claiming to be a woman, or a woman claiming to be a man. Feelings cannot change reality! We need to align with reality.

Well also, a year ago we did not picture Ukraine being invaded and a war going on for, so far, ten months; and we didn't picture all the ripples that that thing would cause across the globe as it drones on. For my part, I did my best impression of the Apostle Paul being lowered over the wall out of Damascus when Jenni Myers whisked me out of Tambov and home from Russia, the day after the war broke out. I got home about a week ahead of schedule.

The geopolitical waves are still impacting the whole world. Our economy is largely affected by what is going on over there. That unprovoked act of aggression by a wicked dictator has cost thousands of lives, ruined cities, and disrupted not just those people attacked but international commerce and relations.

And it has also changed the course of many ministries. I don't think anyone had plans, at New Year last year, for changing the entire emphasis of their church's ministry to humanitarian help and evangelism to refugees, but heroic believers in that part of the world have done just that.

And through it all, God is building His Church (Matt. 16:18). There have been whole new churches planted among people who have come to Christ *since* having been bombed out of their house and their city in Ukraine. We don't rejoice in the evil, but God is at work.

So, yeah, this past year—it was unprecedented. But that shouldn't be a surprise to anybody who knows the Bible. As much as we can be certain that this coming year is going to bring new challenges—sometimes totally unexpected things—we will make our best plans, but we will submit to the will of God, whatever unfolds (Prov. 16:9; Jas. 4:15). We can rest fully assured that whatever happens, God is in control (Ps. 103:19; Dan. 4:35; Is. 46:9-10; Eph. 1:11). Our future with Him is secure (Jn. 6:37b, 44b; 10:27-29; Rom. 8:38-39; 1 Pet. 1:4). He will continue to build the Church worldwide into that Bride for His Son that He intends for it to be (Eph. 5:27; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7-8).

And as we live through the steady erosion of this culture in which we have lived our lives—and *blessed* lives, at that—we know that the degeneration of all of this is *just exactly* as God said it would be! Why, you would think that the Apostle Paul had inside

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---

information about our times when he wrote his final canonical letter; we call it "Second Timothy," and in Second Timothy Chapter 3, the chapter begins with this: "But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come." And then it sounds like he had been watching a review of the ten best movies of last year, when he wrote this: "For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power" (vss. 1-5a; NASB-1995, and throughout, unless otherwise noted).

That's where our world is going. And do you know what? There is no "reverse" gear on cultural erosion; it's *very rare* (cf. 2 Tim. 3:13). It's called "revival"—oh, how *wonderful* that would be! How *nice* if we had to have services here seven days a week to accommodate the people who are coming to hear the Gospel.

Well, before we open God's Word further, I just want to let you know what is going on. This year, as I thought about how I could just talk about the ugly things that happened in 2022—but that's just low-hanging fruit; that's too easy—I just wanted to share from a pastor's heart. And I am presuming, as I do, that you are here because you "belong" to Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:23; cf. 2 Tim. 2:19). I am presuming that you have heard the Gospel—"that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4; cf. Is. 53:5-8; Matt. 20:28; 1 Pet. 3:18a). I am presuming you have not only heard that Gospel, but that you trust in Christ and in Him alone for your salvation (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12; Rom. 3:20-24; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9). I am presuming that you are committed to His Church (Ps. 119:63; Eph. 6:18; Heb. 10:24-25), and that your desire is to serve Him and to serve His people (Gal. 6:10; 1 Thess. 5:11), for His glory alone (Ps. 115:1).

In other words: This is an intramural talk. This isn't evangelism, this is the "holy huddle" for the family of God. We are going to have to go through another year, Lord willing. And if you are *not* fully committed to Christ and to His church—well, hey, I'm also glad that you are here. Listen to what we are talking about; it's not a secret. And then let's get together and talk about, "Why *aren't* you committed to Christ, and what can we do to help you understand what that means and to bring *you* the joy of freedom from sin and its consequences?"

So I'm going to share from my heart, and I'm going to take us to three primary passages. There probably won't be anything new to you, if you have been a Christian more than a week or a year, or whatever. I like what Peter says in Second Peter Chapter 1; he says, "I'm always going to *remind you* of the things that you *know*, and I will *keep* reminding you of the things you know, so that when I am gone, you will be reminded of the things you know" (cf. vs. 12-15).

This isn't rocket science, but it is the Kingdom of God. We need to know the Gospel (Eph. 1:13), let the Gospel change our lives (Acts 26:20; Eph. 2:10), live by the Gospel's teachings *every day* (Lk. 9:23), submit ourselves to the Word of God (Lk. 11:28; Rev. 14:12), rinse, and repeat! If you want to call that "New Year's," that's just fine with me.

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---

But I want to take us to these three passages, under the category of "We Need To Know":

Number 1—We Need To Know The Woes—we'll go to Isaiah 5 for that.

Number 2—We Need To Know How To Prove Ourselves—Philippians 2.

Number 3—We Need To Know What Sort of People To Be—Second Peter.

So let's start with The Woes. Through the Prophet Isaiah, a little over seven hundred years before Jesus came, God pronounced—well, there's a whole lot He pronounced; there are 66 chapters of Isaiah, so it's a big, big book—but there are these six "woes," or these six judgments. Remember, we saw the word "woe" when we were working in Jude a little while back; it means "damnation"—the things that God hates, if you will.

So God pronounced these six woes against the people of Israel who were failing to respond to His *many* calls to repentance through Isaiah and others. The judgment of the Babylonian Captivity was looming upon them. If you look at a timeline, this was over a hundred years before it actually happened. God always warns with *so much patience* and *so much compassion* (cf. Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2; 2 Pet. 3:9; Rev. 2:21). But He gave the warnings, and Isaiah wrote them down for us.

Now, God never changes (Mal. 3:6; cf. Num. 23:19; Heb. 13:8), so the things that brought His judgment upon His special people Israel will likewise bring judgment today. Now, we are *not* Israel; this is not a series of woes pronounced against a political entity *today*. We are the Church. But we also know from Peter that "judgment" is to "begin with the household of God" (1 Pet. 4:17)—we need to *pay attention* to these things!

Our nation is not the chosen nation of God, as was Israel (Deut. 4:20; 10:15; Ps. 135:4; Is. 44:1); but still, we need to know what to run away from, and we need to know what to call people to repent from, just the same today as people did in Isaiah's day (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11; Eph. 5:11).

This portion of Isaiah, by the way, is written as poetry—quite a bit of the book of Isaiah is—and so you will notice in your Bible, if you have a quality translation or a quality version of it, that it is printed line by line. Now, you can translate poetry, but you can't make it rhyme and have the meter and all of that. In Seventh Grade English class, we were doing a section on poetry—and of course, we all loved the day we got to talk about limericks, and one of them that I learned was:

There once was a gas man named Peter,  
Who, while looking around for the meter,  
Touched a leak with his light;  
He arose out of sight!  
And as anyone can tell by reading this, he also destroyed the meter!

You can't make it rhyme, you can't make it sound like that, but this is God's Word in this way of writing, which tends to use a lot of repetition and parallelism. So let me just look at these six woes with you briefly, and you can study them in detail if you'd like.

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---

The first one is in Isaiah Chapter 5, Verse 8; it's about Disrespecting God's Design: "Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field, until there is no more room, so that you have to live alone in the midst of the land!"

Now, that doesn't make a ton of sense to us, okay? It's not "God's Law Against Townhouses"—joining "house to house." But God gave Israel their land with the intention that families would retain what was given to them within their tribe (Lev. 25:25; Num. 27:8-11; 36:1-9). And by Isaiah's time, wealthy speculators were using legal processes to deprive the poor of what rightfully belonged to them (cf. Is. 10:2).

Now, wicked, wealthy people taking advantage of poor people—that's been around forever in every society (cf. Jas. 2:6b; Prov. 22:7)—and we don't have an exact parallel to what Isaiah was addressing; but by analogy, it is safe to say that he is saying: "Don't ignore the past! Don't ignore the history of what God has given to you!"

We do belong to something that is 2,000 years old—the Church of Jesus Christ. And the state of many churches today shows evidence of motivation for power and worldly influence, and being "cool" in this generation, rather than maintaining our connection to our roots, and being committed to compassion and evangelism in the midst of our world. It's as if many churches not only don't respect history and tradition, they eschew it altogether (Jer. 6:16). "We don't want to sing those hymns—*they're old!*" Yeah—and those people are the ones that carried the baton of the Cross through their generation to get to you! *You owe them!* Let's make sure we understand what we are part of, and that we don't disrespect God's design.

Number 2—we'll have *no problem* making a connection to this one in our society: Intoxication. Verse 11 of Isaiah 5—"Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink, who stay up late in the evening that wine may inflame them!"

Is there any doubt that pursuit of pleasure and intoxication is *rampant* in our world? (cf. Jer. 3:2; 5:28; 6:7; Eph. 2:3; 2 Thess. 2:12b; Titus 3:3) Talk about something that wasn't around a year or two ago: I was meeting a pastor friend for lunch in Ontario, Oregon. I wanted to make sure I went to the right restaurant, so I pulled out my map; and sure enough, I found the restaurant. And in that little picture of a map that you can get on your phone, *six marijuana distribution centers!* Are we all in with both feet societally on silliness, or what? Nothing good *ever* comes to *anyone* for pursuing the effects of wine—or, as it's called here, "strong drink," other kinds of liquor—or other drugs, even beyond alcohol (cf. Prov. 20:1; 23:29-35; 31:4-5). Medicine is one thing (e.g., Prov. 31:6-7; Matt. 9:12; 1 Tim. 5:23)—that is a gift from God, that He has allowed us to live with medical things these days. But don't voluntarily put things into your body that are going to *aid* you down the path of dishonoring God (e.g., Rev. 9:21: "sorceries" = "drugs, intoxications"—AMP [Amplified Bible]).

Woe #3: Ridiculing The Prophet. Isaiah 5, Verses 18 and 19—"Woe to those who drag iniquity with the cords of falsehood, and sin as if with cart ropes; who say, 'Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work, that we may see it; and let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near and come to pass, that we may know it!' "

Sermon Title: When The World Is Upside Down  
Scripture Text: Is. 5:8-23; Phil. 2:14-16; 2 Pet. 3:11-12

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 1-1-23

---

What he's saying is: People were mocking Isaiah, *exactly* the same way that Peter describes the "mockers" in Second Peter Chapter 3 (vss. 3-4)—"Where is the promise of His coming?" You've been saying, "Jesus is coming," but everything just keeps going on! And Peter points out: "Well, you know, it kind of 'escapes their notice'—that 'flood' thing: You know, the total destruction of the entire world?" (vss. 5-6). Well, they were mocking Isaiah, and they were saying, "He's been threatening all these bad things, but where are they? Let this come to pass, so that he can be shown to be right." But they didn't want him to be right.

The idea of their "dragging iniquity with the cords of falsehood"—it's like they are binding up their lies and carrying them along with them; they are carrying along their sins with "cart ropes"; they just wanted to continue in their wicked ways. They were mistaking God's patience as if it meant they were not guilty, and Isaiah wasn't right (e.g., Deut. 29:19; Ps. 10:11, 13; 1 Thess. 5:3).

Woe #4—this one you'll also connect immediately to: Redefining Right and Wrong. Isaiah 5:20—"Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"

That is our world in a nutshell. Our president and our congress are leading the charge to say: "Unfettered abortion *is a good thing* for our country, and those who oppose it are *evil!* Same-sex marriage *is a good thing*, and anybody that doesn't wholeheartedly support it—you are *the problem!*" Evil is good; good is evil. Right is wrong; wrong is right. Up is down; down is up. That's our world (cf. Prov. 17:15; 24:24; Mal. 2:17).

I said sometime back in '22, we are at the end of Romans Chapter 1. Romans Chapter 1, Verse 32 says: "Although they *know* the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only *do* the same, but also *give hearty approval* to those who practice them." (cf. Prov. 28:4a) And that is exactly what is being *demanded* these days. You have to "give *hearty approval*"—*no resistance* to calling evil good, and good evil.

Woe #5 is also quite straightforward: Arrogance And Pride. Verse 21—"Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight!"

Oh, man is so full of himself, isn't he? (cf. Ps. 12:8; 73:6-9) The more mankind gains in technology and medicine and engineering and computer science and understanding natural processes, the more that we forget that all of those things are gifts from God, created by God. No good scientist can *possibly* deny God (Rom. 1:19-20). Oh, you can be a good scientist, in the *technology* of it; but if you don't understand that you are studying the handiwork of God (e.g., Ps. 19:1), you miss the whole thing!

Like one of Marsha's and my favorite songs says: "God is not impressed with the loftiness of men!" ("Humble Yourself" © Kelly Willard) Oh, but we sure are. Proverbs 16:18—"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling." (cf. Prov. 11:2; 29:23; Is. 2:11; Dan. 4:37; Jas. 4:6)

Sermon Title: When The World Is Upside Down  
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---

Then there's Woe #6: Judgment Corrupted By Intoxication. "Intoxication" scored *twice* in the list of woes. Verses 22 and 23—"Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant men in mixing strong drink, who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!"

Now, in Isaiah's time, that was a condemnation of unjust judgments and sentences handed down by drunken judges who could be bribed. I don't think it takes much prodding for you to see connections to our world's standards: "*heroes* in drinking wine." Watching some of the football games lately, I just think if we removed advertising alcohol from television these days, a lot of entities would go *bankrupt*. That's our world. And we are careening faster and faster down the path toward destruction (2 Tim. 3:13).

God *will* "judge" (Ps. 9:8; Acts 17:31), so run away from, and speak truth about, what He hates (Eph. 5:11; cf. Ps. 97:10; Prov. 8:13). Understand that we *are* part of something bigger and older and far more significant than *just* our sphere of influence, *just* our local church. What a *privilege* we have, to be a part of what God is doing!

Well, We Need To Know The Woes. Now, let's not just stop, mired in the ugliness. What can we do to learn How To Prove Ourselves? And for this, I want to take you to Philippians Chapter 2, Verses 14 through 16; it's all one sentence: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain."

This is addressed to Christians in a very Roman little city, dominated by a military outpost. And they were living in a corrupted and ever more eroding world system, just like ours. He calls it a "crooked and perverse generation."

"Crooked" comes from a Greek word you almost accidentally know; it's the word *skolios*. Our medical word "scoliosis" means "curvature"; you know, if you look at an x-ray of somebody's spine from front to back or back to front, it's supposed to be straight. Now, there's a curve the other way; but in the way it's supposed to be straight, you don't want to see waves! That's "scoliosis"—"curvature." The world is not straight; it's bent. And you have to know what it is like in order to deal with it. If you stand straight in a crooked world, you are going to stick out, and the world is going to say, "You are the problem." (cf. Prov. 29:27b; Jn. 15:19; 1 Pet. 4:4)

Then he also calls it "perverse." That translates a word that means "distorted," and it describes an abnormal moral condition. If you are honorable and noble and moral, and you live that way and you speak that way in a "perverse" world, you are going to stand out by contrast.

So, look at the command: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing." God commands us—in the most wicked, crooked, perverse, and immoral of circumstances—to constantly keep our attitude in check (cf. Ps. 37:1, 7-8; Prov. 24:19; 2 Tim. 2:24-25).



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---

The word "grumbling" is when you murmur or "complain" out loud about circumstances (Num. 11:1). We also saw *that* word in Jude: You can tell those who are the apostates; they "grumble" and "find fault" (vs. 16). And you know very well that "grumbling" is infectious (e.g., Num. 14:36); you have to work *hard* to not let it infect *you*, especially when you hear it all around you, and you need to make absolutely sure that *you* never spread it (cf. Prov. 25:26).

And then there's the word "disputing." You also kind of accidentally almost know *this* Greek word; it's the word *dialogismos*, from which we get "dialogue." It has the sense of reasoning against someone or against something. As it is used in the New Testament, and especially in combination with the word "grumbling," it has more of the idea of evil thoughts; so it's related to inward reflections on things, where your lips are not moving but you are doubting, you're questioning, you're thinking those wrong things. Understand: God cares just as much about our nasty, snarky, critical *thoughts* as He cares about the complaining *words* that we so easily mutter or even blurt out loud (cf. Ps. 19:14; 101:2; 119:80; Matt. 9:4; 12:36; Acts 8:22; Heb. 4:12).

Now, this is a strong command! It takes *constant* vigilance to obey it well (cf. Ps. 141:3; Prov. 4:23). "Do *all* things without grumbling or disputing."

So, when do you apply this? *Any time* you are in the middle of *anything*. That's all. Otherwise, you're excused. "*All things* without grumbling or disputing."

But *look* what comes from obeying this. As I said, it's all one sentence; the command is at the beginning, but look what happens: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; *so that* you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach..." This is how you "prove" to other people that you are a child of God: You *don't go down* the whining, complaining, grumbling, murmuring, doubting, whispering path. You trust Him so explicitly that complaining is *never* useful, it is *never* productive, and you *know* that (Lam. 3:39; cf. Job 42:3-6; Prov. 19:11; Col. 3:13).

If you want one verse to give you a good reason to limit watching news, here it is! Does it *help you* glorify God, think about things that are good and beautiful and "honorable" (Phil. 4:8), or does it help you grumble and complain? What do you want to fill your mind with? Now, I don't mean, don't pay any attention. You know, if the road is washed out in front of you, I hope there's a sign there that says, "Stop." You need to know that; you can find those things out without saturating your mind in a bunch of ugly things.

And then look what else: "You will prove yourselves to be blameless" in this world, "among whom you appear as lights in the world." If you want to honor Jesus' command—remember, Matthew Chapter 5—"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (vs. 16)—well, what a glorious time to live, because the backdrop is getting blacker and blacker and blacker; you light your light, and by your attitude—*just your attitude, even before you say the words of the Gospel*—you can "prove yourselves" to be "lights in the world," just by doing things, "*all things* without grumbling or disputing."

Sermon Title: When The World Is Upside Down  
Scripture Text: Is. 5:8-23; Phil. 2:14-16; 2 Pet. 3:11-12

Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 1-1-23

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Notice what *else* it says you get by "doing all things without grumbling and disputing": "holding fast the word of life..." Doing all these things with the right attitude is how you display to the world that you live by a different standard, and they just might "ask you" to give "a *reason* for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:15, ESV). "How in the world can you have joy? Don't you know what a mess we are in?" "Well, I have joy because I have an 'eternal inheritance' (Heb. 9:15) 'which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away' (1 Pet. 1:4), and I am 'kept by the power of God' (1 Pet. 1:5, NKJV) until I inherit it fully." Wow!

And then he says: "so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory..." Paul is talking about eternal rewards! He is basically saying, "If you guys live like real Christians, and therefore it shows that you are real Christians, Wow—I'm going to have reason to give glory to God for spreading the Gospel through you!" (cf. 1 Thess. 2:19)

Now, there is plenty to dislike about our world (cf. 1 Jn. 5:19). But don't let it ruin your attitude. You "prove yourself" to be His child every day, one situation at a time, in "*all* things," by your attitude. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...mind...and strength," and "love your neighbor as yourself" in the same manner (Lk. 10:27), and you are going to stand out as a shining light for the glory of God.

There has *never* been an *easier time* to shine for the glory of God, because in our nation, in our world, things have *never* been this ugly! (cf. Prov. 4:19; Jn. 3:19) This is *the very best time ever* in the *history* of this nation to be a child of God, and spread His Gospel.

We Need To Know The Woes. We Need To Know How To Prove Ourselves. And then, quickly, one more passage: We Need To Know What Sort Of People To Be. This is in Second Peter Chapter 3, Verses 11 and 12—"Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way..." Go ahead and read the earlier part of the chapter; he is talking about "the world"—everything is going to be destroyed. And the "mockers" are saying, "Oh, yeah, when is that going to happen?" So Peter says, "Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!"

Do you see what he is saying? *Judgment is coming*—just like Isaiah said. "The wicked" are flying high right now (Ps. 12:8; 14:1-3; 37:1, 7-8; 73:3-12; Is. 47:10), but they will not prevail forever (cf. Ps. 73:18-20; Is. 3:11; Lk. 6:24-26; 1 Jn. 2:17). When you understand God is going to "judge the world" (Ps. 98:9) with *perfect* "righteous judgment" (Rom. 2:5), when you understand that His "wrath" will be "poured out" (Nah. 1:6), undiluted (Rev. 14:10), against sin and sinners (Ps. 1:5), what do you do? Well, Peter put the answer into his rhetorical question here: "What sort of people ought you to be"—and then he defines what you are to be: "in holy conduct and godliness."

I make no specific predictions for the coming year. I can tell you that the trajectory of our world is morally and spiritually downward (2 Tim. 3:13), and the degeneration is accelerating (cf. Prov. 27:20; Ecc. 5:10).

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---

I know that even in the world of professing Christians, there is what Charles Spurgeon dealt with in his day: a "Down Grade Controversy": The compromise with the world is likewise accelerating among Christians. Denomination after denomination—two of the biggest ones in America are being rent in two right now, with those that are standing for God's definition of marriage or of race being *driven out* from that which they have built.

Church after church and parachurch organizations alike are buying into the world's ways. "Critical Race Theory" is now rampant. "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion"—or, "DEI"—training—I don't think I knew that acronym a year ago, and now there are a whole bunch of people who are part of the Heritage Bible Church family that have had to go through it. "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion"—that means, "We celebrate how diverse we are—but you are not welcome unless you think like we think you should. We believe in the equality of *everyone*—except the opinion of those who stand for what God says. And we believe in total welcoming inclusion of everybody—but we will fire you in a moment if you don't kowtow to saying what we want you to say."

And I have friends in ministry who are being squeezed out of crumbling organizations with which they have served for *decades*, because they are being told that their view on marriage is antiquated. Well, yeah, it was 6,000 years ago when God invented it, in the Book of Genesis. Call that "antiquated" if you want to; I call it "true"! (cf. Is. 40:8)

Our church, and others like it, are becoming more and more like islands of refuge from creeping Liberalism, from Critical Race Theory, and assaults on marriage and morality. So, my call to us is, more than ever, to be diligent to be what the church is supposed to be (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:15). I don't think President Putin is going to invade Mexico or Canada. I don't think we are going to have a lot of refugees bombed out of their houses, showing up where we can give them a bed and some food and the Gospel, but we are getting spiritual refugees all the time—people saying, "Oh, my church! Grandma and Grandpa took me there; and now, if you stand for what God says, *you're not welcome!*" How sad.

May we be known for—what? Well, "holy conduct and godliness." May we "prove ourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom we appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life."

Beloved, don't waste time and energy trying to *restore a culture* that is hell-bent on turning away from God and attacking those who love Him! *That's not why we are here!* (cf. Acts 2:40; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Acts 17:30-31) I *miss* the way some things were when I was a kid. I wasn't even a Christian, but the world was way more Christian than a lot of Christians are today, if that makes any sense.

We are here, not to fix a broken culture; we are here to bear witness to the risen Christ, to proclaim the Gospel, to be about serving Him as He "builds His Church" (Matt. 16:18)—and that comes *one soul at a time*.

So, we know why God has left us here to enter a brand new year, at least *one more time* through the calendar—unless He takes us home before then. But, why?

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Speaker: Jim Harris  
Date: 1-1-23

---

Well, do you know anybody that doesn't know Christ? Well, there's part of your "Things To Do" list for the year! God left you here in order to be the conduit for the Gospel (cf. Rom. 10:14; 2 Cor. 5:18).

God's Church is not in trouble. *Man's* church is! Let's be the real deal. We come together to worship and to serve, not to *be* served, not to have somebody give us what we want. We come to "do all things without grumbling or disputing." That's a lofty standard, but rejecting with all our hearts everything that God hates—that *is* a high calling, but it is *worth pursuing*.

Oh, and by the way: It wouldn't be one of my traditional New Year messages if I didn't say: "Don't forget: This comes at a cost!" Second Timothy 3:12—"Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus *will be persecuted*." (cf. Ps. 37:12, 32; Prov. 29:27; Matt. 5:10-11; 10:22; 24:9; Jn. 15:19; 1 Pet. 4:4). But *don't be afraid!* Peter wrote, in the same kind of setting: "Cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (NKJV). You do the "casting"; He will do the "caring" (cf. Ps. 55:22).

I mentioned that we belong to something that is a lot older than us, a lot bigger than us. Well, it that's not an excuse to quote Charles Spurgeon, I don't know what is. You can read that guy *every day*. His "Morning and Evening" devotions are well worth it. He often spoke extemporaneously, and then it got written down, and he came up with stuff like this. Let me just read this to you. I did update it from his Elizabethan English, but that's all. He says this:

"How often do you and I stand stargazing into the future and trembling, because we think we see various signs or warnings and strange sights which portend some future troubles? Oh, child of God, leave the future to your God. Oh, leave everything that is to come in the hand of Him to whom the future is already present, and who knows beforehand *everything* that shall befall you! Draw from the present, living water with which to moisten the arid desert of the future. Snatch from the altar-fires of today a torch with which to light up the darkness of that which is to come. Depend on it that He who is today your Sun shall be the Sun forever, shining even in the darkest hour. He shall shine upon you. And He who is today your Shield shall be your Shield forevermore; and even in the thickest part of the battle, He shall catch the dart, and you shall stand unharmed." (cf. Ps. 84:11; Prov. 30:5; Mal. 4:2)

Wow! I wish God would give me a mind to think like that, about one hour a week! I would type like *crazy!* He got it, didn't he?

Let's pray:

*Our Father, we come to You, recognizing the kind of world in which we live, and Your beautiful sovereign providence which has placed us here at this time. We come to You like that man who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus, and said, "I do believe! Help my unbelief!" Father, we confess how readily we slip into that consumer mentality of our world, and we begin to seek what makes us comfortable and happy, and grumble and dispute if we don't have it.*

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*Please, teach us to love what You love, and to seek what honors and pleases You more than our own peace and comfort and affluence.*

*Father, some of us here have employment which hangs in the balance if we speak up for You. Give us grace, guide our paths in the way of righteousness for Your name's sake. Some of us have family members going down the path of the LGBTQ philosophy and horrible errors. And Father, we are Your spokespeople for them. Give us wisdom, give us grace, compassion, boldness, and love as we speak truth.*

*We confess how easily we fall into letting our feelings dominate our decision-making. Father, teach us to want to treat others as we want to be treated, and to do it "without grumbling and disputing." We confess how we easily slip into regarding ourselves as the victims of the sins of others; and we get our feelings hurt, so we pull away; we blame others for hurting us, and we forget how our sin hurts You, and drove Your Son to the Cross.*

*Please, let us learn how to rejoice at "doing all things without grumbling or disputing." And please, Lord, in the coming year, make Heritage Bible Church a place from which individual lights shine together for Your glory when we gather, and then disperse into the dark corners of the world that we encounter, and bring the light of Your Gospel to people in darkness of sin. Help us to love more than ever these precious times when we gather together. "May Your Kingdom come. May Your will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven. Even so, come Lord Jesus!" Amen.*